

I'll Be Here

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I'll Be Here

by [Indertia](#)

Summary

“I have... Been through a lot.”

Lumine frowned. “‘A lot’ seems to be a gross understatement. You’re like a walking ball of trauma. Being enslaved and tortured for decades and then losing your whole family *and then fighting this endless war, alone*, seems to qualify as more than ‘a lot.’ Maybe more like ‘constant suffering.’”

“I have a contract, and it’s my duty and my honor to fulfill that contract. Even now that you defeated Osial, it’s still my job to defend Liyue from the demons that plague it.” Xiao rubbed his Vision between two fingers. “I’m the last defender in this invisible war.”

“Hm.” Lumine sighed and rested her chin on her palm, looking up at Xiao with big honey-yellow eyes. “Then who will defend you?”

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Xiao's Backstory, from being enslaved and tortured to losing everyone he cares about; and the subsequent Story of how he finds healing in a certain Outlander. Angst ensues and relief follows.

Notes

Thanks for reading! I upload every other Friday Night/Early Saturday Morning with some exceptions :)

IBH started in March, 2021, long before the 2.7 update. There is no CANON confirmation of which yaksha is named what name. If you made the assumption on your own, maybe this work isn't for you and that's fine, but please don't come at me saying I got them wrong~ please be nice and work with the characterizations that I created. Thank you!

Find me on [Twitter](#)

Play Genshin with me! My Xiao does 2800+ damage ;D

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The First Day

Chapter Summary

“I am Alatus, the Anemo yaksha.” He tasted the name and felt it settle into his soul.
“Alatus.”

She smiled, a watery motion that reached her eyes. “I am Indarias. And I promise to take care of you.”

“We all will,” Bosacius added quickly.

Alatus smiled back, and the air itself smiled with him.

Chapter Notes

I pronounce his name as a-LAY-tus.

I had to guess at which yaksha was named which name, so don't come at me for getting it wrong there's literally no canon answer as to who's who.

Enjoy~

His earliest memory was of standing on a hill, leaning into the wind, closing his eyes as he tilted on his toes and let the current support all his weight. The air blew his hair back, brisk and clean against his cheekbones, rushing blissfully in his ears. He wore a soft green changpao tunic and loose white pants that moved with the wind, wrapping about his figure as if they knew he was a treasure. He turned his hands over, marveling at the clean green shapes that marked his right arm. A small gold and glass square hung on a gold thread around his left wrist, and a shining black ceramic mask floated from the rope tied loosely at his waist. Strangers stood around him, and yet he felt only love and no fear. They were yaksha, his family: this, he knew, was a fundamental truth.

“Who am I?” He asked them.

“You are a gift!” A yaksha responded. “The fulfillment of a whispered wish, the blessing in response to a quiet request for joy. We asked the archons to give us all that we needed, and they gave us you.” She beamed, and her gaze was as comforting as a calm stream of water.

He considered this. “What is my purpose?”

“You harness the power of Anemo.” The tallest of the yaksha addressed him, stroking his amber chin thoughtfully. “You will help us to protect our land and keep the demons away from the humans. You are here to magnify us, to make our strength stronger, to increase the power that we already have.”

“Not only that.” A four-armed yaksha moved closer to him, but he did not feel any intimidation. “You are here to enrich our lives! Things have become still over the last century or so, and even if

you increase our power, we hope to find a new friend, a new personality, a new story, and another brother in you.” He pointed to himself, and excited electricity crackled through the air. “I am Bosacius. Do you have a name, brother?”

He shook his head slowly. “Would you give me one?”

The tall amber yaksha laughed, a rumbling sound that spread all the way through the ground and resonated in the heads of everyone around. “He asks many questions, this young one. What do you think of ‘Curiosus?’”

“Archons, no!” The flaming yaksha protested. “He will grow out of his curiosity. He will not grow out of how cute he is! Thoughts on ‘Bellus?’”

The tall yaksha snorted in response. “What makes you think he’ll stay baby-cute forever, Menogias? He will become too manly for that name in no time.”

“It’s still a better name than no name.”

“How about Bosacius, Jr.?” Bosacius winked.

“No one but you wants that! He definitely doesn’t want that, does he?” Menogias almost stamped her foot.

“I think Bosacius Jr. is perfect.”

Menogias shot a playful bolt of fire at Bosacius, who easily deflected it. The firebolt bounced off Bosacius’s arm and into a nearby body of water, vaporizing with a hiss and startling a frog that croaked in surprise and leaped high into the air.

“Hah!” The youngest yaksha burst out laughing at that, a lilting, contagious sound that bubbled out of him, filling the air with ascending music. His eyes, golden as mora, crinkled at the corners as he grinned, catching the frog mid-fall and placing it gently back in the water. “There you go!” It paddled stressfully away, and he laughed again, wiping his wet hands on the sides of his pants.

He looked around, noticing the sudden silence around him, and turned to face his new family, all of who were gazing at him in wonder.

“That was one of the most adorable sounds I’ve ever heard,” the tall, blue-horned yaksha marveled, and the other yaksha murmured sounds of agreement. “Your name is Alatus. Alatus for both the wings of your Vision and the wings of your voice. What do you think?” She extended her hand to him, and he took it.

“I am Alatus, the Anemo yaksha.” He tasted the name and felt it settle into his soul. “Alatus.”

She smiled, a watery motion that reached her eyes. “I am Indarias. And I promise to take care of you.”

“We all will,” Bosacius added quickly.

Alatus smiled back, and the air itself smiled with him.

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He sat on the edge of a cliff in Jueyan Karst, kicking his legs up and down, basking in the sun. Indarias knelt behind him, pulling a comb through his hair. The gentle tugs comforted him as he

took in the Liyue horizon, just a little overstimulated, trying to take in everything he had learned in this one day. His eyes moved back and forth. He watched as a cloud of mist moved lazily across the sky, then darted his gaze to a bright chunk of amber that jutted out from the peak of a nearby hill. There was so much to see, and so much to know. The world was so full of goodness, he thought; the sweet-smelling air was good, the sound of cranes and crickets was good, and the feeling of warm fingers brushing his scalp was good.

“I’m going to style your hair like mine, okay?” Indarias was saying, trimming the hair at the back of his head. “If we leave two longer strands in front of your ears, they will frame your face very nicely.” She adjusted his bangs just so and brushed the rest of his hair back. “Perfect!”

He blinked up at her, legs still swinging, eyes reflecting the setting Liyue sun. “Am I really perfect, Indarias?”

She laughed shortly, a sputtering sound like a leak in a dam. “Well, darling, just because I think you’re perfect doesn’t mean that you actually are. I think that we like to believe we are invincible, especially Bosacius, but that doesn’t mean we are perfect. There is no such thing as free power.” She gave his teal locks one more fluff before taking a seat next to him.

“What does that mean?” He asked, brushing stray hairs off of his shoulders.

Indarias sighed. “I feel like we have told you too much already for your first day of life... There is no power that does not come with some weakness, and the greater the power, the greater the weakness. And I sense that you, Alatus, are extremely powerful.” She touched the tip of her index finger to his nose, and he scrunched his face in protest.

“What is my weakness, then?” he asked, trying to bat her hand away.

“Well, you have here, here, and here,” she teased, poking his belly and sides as he squeaked and scooted away from her. “I’d almost say a weakness is how much people want to hear you laugh!”

“Really!” he giggled, drawing his knees up to his chest in an attempt to protect himself from the tickling. “What weaknesses do I have?”

She patted his back and knit her eyebrows. “As you learn more about yourself, you should be able to identify them yourself. Some weaknesses come in physical forms, and others come in more emotional forms. You won’t understand that now, but you will eventually. Other than that...” She smiled. “Our lives are essentially perfect, like we said. We eat because we want to, not because we need to. We sleep because we want to, not because we need to. Occasionally we protect our land from all kinds of malice, but there has never been a threat that we could not handle.”

Alatus looked down at his hand, where his sparkling Anemo Vision glowed softly. “Together, are we invincible?”

The sun dipped below the horizon, and the sky tinged twilight purple. “This was your first sunset,” Indarias said softly, almost to herself. “Yes, Alatus. Together, we are strong.” She turned her face to look at him dead-on, and he instinctively straightened his spine. The purple sky darkened another notch, and Indarias’s gaze took on a more menacing light.

She reached over and scooped up the black ceramic mask at Alatus’s side. She dragged one finger over the gold lacquer on it, tracing the lines from the pointed ears to the jagged white tusks. “When we defend ourselves and our land from malice, we can usually hold our own. Our faces are like those of humans, the truest version of ourselves. But when we put the masks on...” She held his mask up to her own face, icy blue eyes peering through the eyeholes. “We hide the human parts of

ourselves, and our greater power is unleashed.” She waved her hand, and the mask rematerialized in Alatus’s lap. “You must always remember to protect the catalyst of your humanity.”

Alatus placed the mask on his face, feeling the power in him swell just a bit before snapping it away again. “What will happen if I do not?”

Indarias shook her head. “I genuinely do not know. It is something I was taught when I was your age, and something I know is important when I wear the mask. If it were to leave your possession... I don’t want to know what would happen.”

Alatus shifted the mask in his hands. It suddenly seemed heavier than usual. He frowned, fighting the sudden urge to drop it off the edge of the cliff.

“But know this, Alatus. We will always protect you!” Bosacius’s voice boomed out from behind them. “Why are you scaring the boy on his first night? Let us go fly around and find some sweet flowers. I have a hankering for Lotus Crisps, and it will be the perfect opportunity to see how our new brother can glide without a license!”

Alatus laughed, forgetting all about the weight of his mask, and Indarias couldn’t hold back her smile at the sound. “There aren’t any sweet flowers in Lotus Crisps, Bosacius. They must be processed into sugar first.”

Bosacius scoffed and crossed his four arms across his chest and torso. “Fine, then. Regardless, allow me to take Alatus gliding! Have you tried gliding, Alatus? Or sweet flowers?” He winked, and purple sparks flew.

“No, but I want to try!” Alatus exclaimed excitedly, scrambling to his feet.

Without any warning or preamble, Bosacius scooped Alatus up in his two bottom arms and nosedived right off the cliff, spreading the wings of his glider across his broad shoulders. “Be safe!” Indarias’s voice called distantly after them.

Alatus’s joyful cheers echoed across Jueyan Karst as the glider dipped and rose with the wind currents, and the heart of every adeptus that heard it swelled with affection.

All-powerfully Gentle

Chapter Summary

“The humans recently started making something called crystal shrimp. You should try some; it’s very sweet.”

The air was extremely sweet with the smell of lilies. Alatus inhaled deeply, trying to imagine the taste on his tongue. “Mm.”

“Yes, exactly.” Bosacius tapped the jade point of Alatus’s spear. “Do not ever let human blood stain this jade. The humans have to be protected, or the food will stop. Promise me!” He stared into Alatus’s eyes with a playful sternness.

Alatus nodded in matching playful seriousness. “I promise!” He held Bosacius’s gaze for a moment... And was instantly distracted by a passing butterfly.

Alatus was a fast learner. He learned how to use a sword, shoot a bow, and use momentum to heft a heavy claymore to fight off hilichurls that invaded Jueyan Karst. He learned to glide the wind currents, outracing all the other yaksha with his naturally agile frame and affinity for Anemo. He learned to navigate using the stars, and in no time at all he knew all of Minlin well enough to walk around without ever looking where he was stepping. He learned how to cleanse the dirt and ash that accumulated on his clothes, how to dance, and how to harmonize his voice with the melodies that Indarias would sing. And when the seventeenth day of the fourth month of his one-hundredth year of life passed, Bonanus presented him with a beautiful, jade-topped spear. “Such a little yaksha needs a very tall weapon!” He’d said, laughing. Of course, Alatus was quick to learn how to use it. No matter what Alatus laid a hand to, he was able to master.

There was one thing, however, that he didn’t fully understand.

“Where do the hilichurls come from? Why are they our problem?” He asked Bosacius one day, after one particularly aggressive mob of hilichurls invaded Mount Hulao and subsequently perished. The horned goblin-monsters burst into sparks upon death, and Alatus had often wondered where they went after that.

Bosacius blinked back at him. “Why do you ask this now?”

Alatus frowned. “I do not particularly enjoy killing. Sparring with you or Menogias is one thing, but it seems like a whole other thing to end the life of these hilichurls.” He kicked at a broken mask that was left behind after the disintegration of a hilichurl.

Bosacius grinned. “Would you rather end the life of me or Menogias?”

“Of course not!” Alatus kicked the broken mask at Bosacius, who jumped aside.

“I’m joking!” Bosacius brushed the kicked-up dust out of his pants. “Of course you wouldn’t. I think that at your very core, Alatus, you are one of the most gentle beings I have ever known. I’m glad that you ask questions, and I pray to Morax that you never lose that gentleness. No yaksha has ever been so sad about scaring away all the cranes in the ponds of Mount Hulao.”

“This is their favorite place!” Alatus responded defensively. “The cranes love this pond. This is where they get their water from. If the hilichurls keep scaring them away, where will they go?”

The Electro yaksha shook his head, smiling. “The cranes will be back.” He sat down on a nearby rock, sighing as he stretched his legs into the spring sunshine. “Are you ready for some stories?”

“I love stories.” Alatus waded into the crane’s pond, appreciating the cool water splashing in gentle waves on his skin. Some lily pads floated away from him, bumping against each other, and he laughed.

Bosacius took a deep breath. “I never wanted to tell you anything that would ever keep you from laughing like that. But this will not be like the normal stories Indarias or Bonanus tell you. This is important, so listen well, alright?”

Alatus, sensing the change in atmosphere, turned towards his brother. “I’m listening.”

There was a slight crease between Bosacius’s eyebrows, but he started speaking with no hesitation. “During the past Archon Wars, where Morax and many other gods fought for control of Teyvat, many living things died. This you know. Humans, archons, monsters... Their bodies may have died, but the power and hate has to go somewhere, correct? The residual energy and power ends up going into anything surrounding it. Sometimes it will take over plants, which is why we have Regisvines and whopperflowers.”

Alatus rolled his eyes; whopperflowers were the biggest nuisance to fight off, and they spawned so wearily often.

“Yes, I know.” Bosacius chuckled. “Sometimes the power will take over hilichurls, even though I’m pretty certain that in its most natural state, all a hilichurl wants to do is dance, or sleep, or do whatever hilichurls do, I don’t know. I’m not a hilichurl.” He shrugged his upper shoulders.

“Ha!” Alatus burst out laughing.

Bosacius smiled ruefully. “So we fight them off to protect ourselves and our space, so we can keep doing what we do every day.” He spread his four hands out wide. “So we can live and do the things that we like, and enjoy each other’s company.”

Alatus bent to drag his hand through the water; the conversation didn’t seem to be as heavy as he initially thought it would. “What about humans? What happens when a human wanders up here? What are they even hoping for?” A lily pad petal stuck to his hand, and he swirled it off in the water.

Bosacius groaned, and a spark of electric irritation flew into the air. “Some people have this idea that since we’re here, Jueyan Karst is like sacred ground or something, and they’ll be blessed or healed or some nonsense.”

Alatus wrinkled his nose. “Is it true?”

“Pft, Archons, no!” Bosacius huffed. “Humans are dumb. But we do not hurt them. It takes a truly weak-minded human to be possessed by a demonic energy, and the humans do not stand a chance against a yaksha anyway. I suppose we don’t really care about them, though they do make good food!” He smiled dreamily, mouth watering slightly. “They recently started making something called crystal shrimp. You should try some; it’s very sweet.”

The air was extremely sweet with the smell of lilies. Alatus inhaled deeply, trying to imagine the taste on his tongue. “Mm.”

“Yes, exactly.” Bosacius tapped the jade point of Alatus’s spear. “Do not ever let human blood stain this jade. The humans have to be protected, or the food will stop. Promise me!” He stared into Alatus’s eyes with a playful sternness.

Alatus nodded in matching playful seriousness. “I promise!” He held Bosacius’s gaze for a moment... And was instantly distracted by a passing butterfly. He held his hand out, and the butterfly landed lazily on his fingers.

Bosacius watched the youngest yaksha in amazement. “How are you so unbelievably strong and yet so gentle?”

The butterfly fluttered its wings slowly. Alatus lifted his hand higher, and it took flight again. “What do you mean?”

“Your power is unparalleled, and we can all already tell.” Bosacius pulled one knee closer and propped his elbow on it, resting his chin against one of his hands. His purple eyes watched Alatus thoughtfully. “Don’t tell Menogias I said this. But at your young age, you’re already stronger than we are. We knew you would be powerful, but I don’t think we quite knew just how powerful.” He laughed, and the sound was genuine, but Alatus couldn’t see what was funny. “Even though we could tell from the moment we saw you that you were going to be a real force of nature. It was almost a little scary, even.”

“Scary?” Alatus turned his hands over. They looked normal, perhaps a little more callused than before, short nails and thin knuckles, with the same green markings that started from his right shoulder all the way to his wrist. He clenched his fists, feeling the Anemo energy build. “How did you know just from seeing me?” He asked.

“Your mask is particularly fierce.” Bosacius held out his hand, materializing his own yaksha mask, and held it out for Alatus to see. “The fangs on your mask point down, like those of a sabre toothed tiger, instead of up, like mine and Bonanus’s.” He pointed to the black mask hanging from Alatus’s rope belt. “Usually, predatory animals like the tiger have downward facing fangs, while more defensive creatures like boars and elephants have upward facing tusks.”

Alatus lifted his mask from his right hip and ran his finger over the sharp point of the fangs. It was true; his mask had four large, sharp teeth, while Bosacius’s only had two smaller points that turned upwards. He had never noticed before. He closed his fingers around the side of the mask, squeezing slightly. It was odd to think of himself as stronger than the other yaksha, who had been alive and fighting for so much longer than he had. Was it fair? Was it right? Was he even deserving of this kind of power?

The sun was starting to set, casting red and gold light all across Mount Hulao. The sky tinged a lightly ominous pink, and the water lapping at Alatus’s knees grew colder. The mask was heavy and vaguely threatening in Alatus’s hand. The snarling face seemed to promise to bring pain. It was easy to imagine demons fleeing from the sight of it.

“From the moment we saw you,” Bosacius repeated softly, “we knew you would be strong. And we loved you.”

“I didn’t ask to be strong,” Alatus interrupted. His voice was quiet. “I would have been happy to just be alive. I love to sing. I love Jueyan Karst. I even love doing my laundry, sometimes. I didn’t need the downward facing fangs, or whatever pressure comes with this power. I don’t want this kind of power. I shouldn’t have it if it causes all of you to be scared of me.” He frowned, weighing the mask in his hand.

“Hey, hey, heyheyheyhey.” Bosacius scrambled to his feet, leaping into the water and landing in front of Alatus with a splash, sending lily pads flying in every which way. Alatus blinked in surprise as Bosacius seized him by the shoulders and shook him slightly in his powerful grip. “We prayed for someone strong. We literally begged the archons to bless us with someone powerful. But don’t you think for a moment that we are threatened, or afraid, or somehow bitter that you are strong!” His two upper arms waved wildly in the air to punctuate his points. “We wanted help. We wanted you. And you never disappoint us or scare us, and I didn’t mean to make you feel like there is pressure behind your power. You’re perfect the way you are, okay?” He stared lightning bolts into Alatus’s golden eyes. “Do you hear me? Do you believe me?”

“Yes!” Alatus managed to get out. “I hear you.”

Bosacius exhaled in relief before releasing the younger yaksha. “Good.” He ran a hand through his dark hair, causing it to stand up from the static. “These masks... They give us a lot of power, but also a lot of suffering. I don’t think Indarias wants me to tell you this. I don’t think she wanted you to put the mask on in the first place, but honestly, you’re one century old now and it’s probably fine.”

The mask thrummed and whispered as Alatus held it closer to his face. “I have felt its power before, but I never actually put it on.”

“That’s fine. You haven’t needed the extra power before.” Bosacius considered his words carefully. “When you hide your human face behind the mask, it allows you to destroy things more easily, but it also becomes easier to give in to the need for destruction. Do you understand? You will be stronger, but you will have to resist the negative energy that it will try to draw out of you. That energy is what makes you a yaksha, but if unchecked, your power can blow out of control, and you will expel all of your life force just to fuel it. Do you understand?”

Alatus dropped his hand, and the mask fell back down against his hip. “I understand.”

Bosacius patted Alatus’s back. “We want you around, no matter what you think. Do you believe me?”

He smiled. The small ache in his heart smoothed over with the warmth of knowing he was cared for. “I do.”

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“Why would you tell him?!” Indarias’s voice was sharp and cold as ice.

Alatus stood quietly, shifting his weight from foot to foot, twisting his spear in his hand, back and forth, back and forth, wondering silently if he could just jump into the waterfall and disappear into the night.

”You can’t protect him forever, Indarias! He’s not a baby. He’s never been a baby.” Bonanus boomed gruffly.

“Compared to us, everyone’s a baby.” Menogias pointed out.

“Not Morax or Osial.” Bosacius was quick to quip.

“Ah, you’re right. Other than them, compared to us, everyone’s a baby.” Menogias corrected herself.

“He might not be a baby, but he’s still young!” Indarias snapped, crossing her arms over her chest.

Bosacius made a frustrated sound like thunder. “He is a century old. He should be allowed to experiment with his power and understand what we fight for.”

“You say he is a century old. I say he is only a century old!” Indarias insisted.

“What about us, then?!” Bosacius raised his voice for the first time. The air crackled. “We are strong, but the demons have numbers, and we are limited. Perhaps right now we don’t need Alatus to use his mask, but what about the next century? Or the one after that? Are you going to make him use it out of necessity, and maybe fall victim to the voices, or are you going to let him practice it slowly now?” Lightning flashed in his purple eyes. “How are you going to protect him then?”

Indarias’s expression didn’t change. Her long blue hair trembled behind her in silent anger.

Alatus took a tentative step closer to her. “I want to practice,” he offered.

The yaksha turned to look at him, just a little surprised; Alatus didn’t usually speak when they bickered. Indarias’s light blue eyes softened. “Of course you do,” she sighed.

He stopped twisting the spear, feeling his confidence grow. “I’m going to practice, and get really good at controlling myself. I can get stronger. I can protect you, and you won’t have to worry about me.”

“Alatus..” Indarias pressed her lips together. “I always worry about you.”

”I can handle it!” Alatus persisted, a little more enthusiastically. “I am strong. I know I’m strong.” He met Bosacius’s eyes, and the two shared a knowing smile. “It will be okay.”

“I’ll help you practice!” Menogias interjected, waving her flaming bow. “I’m super cute in my mask. I have control. I have so much control. I bet I’m stronger than you with my mask, Alatus!”

Bosacius looped an arm around Menogias’s shoulders. “So you admit that he’s stronger than you without it, huh?” He teased, and the Pyro yaksha smacked his hand.

Bonanus looked at Indarias from the corner of his amber eyes. “What do you think, Indarias?”

Alatus looked up at her expectantly.

Indarias threw up her hands. “Fine, I give in. You are right. I probably baby Alatus too much.” She cast Bosacius a sharp glance. “The moment he starts wavering, you stop. The moment you cannot handle the sparring, you stop. At no point is anyone allowed to get hurt. Understand?”

“Yes!” Bosacius whooped. “Today, Alatus is a complete yaksha and no longer a baby!” He pumped a fist, and Alatus laughed.

“Sure, sure,” Indarias said impatiently. “Alatus, come here and let me brush your hair. You’ve got lily pad in it.”

Menogias rolled her eyes. “Some things never change.”

“I am not babying him!” Indarias protested as the other yaksha laughed. Alatus obediently moved to sit in front of her, and she carded her fingers through his teal locks. “Was today a good day?” she asked him.

Alatus leaned into the comforting touch. The tense atmosphere had blown away. He watched as Bonanus and Bosacius began an arm wrestling contest, four arms against one, and laughed when

Bosacius struggled against Bonanus's rock-steady muscle. "I will never get tired of that sound," he heard Indarias say to herself behind him.

"It was a good day," he responded, content. "I have a good life."

"I'm glad you think so," Indarias said proudly. She hummed softly, a light, hauntingly beautiful melody that shifted in cadences with her voice.

The moon reflected brightly in the water, illuminating Jueyan Karst in soft silver light, and Alatus smiled.

Everything is Okay

Chapter Summary

“Hello, family. Did I miss something?” Indarias broke the silence. “I brought Jueyan Guoba.” She held up a cloth sack of the spicy snacks.

“Welcome home, Indarias!” Alatus’s face lit up.

Bosacius sighed. “You missed a demon attack, and then ruined a very nice, very rare moment of quiet between us.”

The smell of Jueyan chilies permeated the air and Alatus’s nose as Indarias opened the sack. “Does this make up for it?” She tossed a rice snack to Bosacius, and he caught it in his teeth.

“Sure,” he mumbled between crunches. “I forgive you.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

The spear made a satisfying whooshing sound as it spun in Alatus’s hand. No matter how many times he had heard it before or would hear it again, he knew he would never tire of it.

“Stop showing off and kill them already!” Menogias shouted at him breathlessly, blasting a possessed hilichurl with a firebolt. “We get it, Alatus, you’re good with a spear!”

Alatus vaulted off the point of his spear, using the momentum to turn into an aerial that crashed the hilichurl into the ground. The Anemo energy from the force of the blow spread the flames of Menogias’s power, alighting both the grass and the hilichurls around him. He pushed himself up again, dashing quickly out of the way for Bosacius, who slammed the fire with a mighty electric shock. Overloaded pulses shot through the ground, further knocking back the hilichurls.

“Take the last hit!” Bosacius called up to him.

“Got it!” Alatus passed his hand over his face, feeling the familiar pressure of his mask press into his skin. Anemo power surged through him, and his eyes narrowed as he smiled, ignoring the sounds of soft whispers in his ears. He felt taller and stronger, swinging his jade spear more easily, moving faster with less exertion. Invincible.

His heartbeat sped up, and he flexed his fist. “Evil conquering!” He jumped high into the air, turning at the last moment to spin headfirst directly into the midst of the flames and electricity. Anemo energy shot up from the ground, tossing hilichurls left and right. Their bodies disintegrated, and Alatus straightened in satisfaction.

“Nice one!” Bosacius boomed, clapping a heavy hand onto Alatus’s shoulder.

The extra strength from the mask kept Alatus from buckling under the weight. “Thank you.” He shook his head, clearing the noise from his mind. The mask dusted away from his face, rematerializing as it always did on his right hip, and he wiped his forehead with the back of his

hand.

“One more incoming!” Bonanus warned sharply, hefting his broadsword into a swinging position. The power of Geo rippled the dirt under their feet, knocking the last attacking hilichurl onto its back.

Alatus laughed, shifting his feet with the motion of the earth. “I’ll get him, Bonanus!” He whipped his spear into his hand, spinning it into the hilichurl with a whirlwind thrust. The hilichurl flew upwards from the impact, disintegrating upon its return to the ground.

“Well done!” Bonanus applauded him, shaking the surrounding mountains with the clapping sound. “It really does seem as though you are stronger every day.”

“Hah!” Menogias flopped down onto the grass by the waterfall. “It’s highly possible we are just slowing down, Banana. I’m feeling pretty old today.”

“I asked that you please not call me that.” Bonanus frowned.

She propped herself up on her elbows, smirking cheekily. “Which? Banana? Or old?”

“Either!”

Alatus laughed again, exhaling softly as the adrenaline slowly left his body. “It’s okay, Bonanus! I don’t think you’re old.”

The Geo yaksha lowered his massive frame beside Menogias on the grass, groaning loudly as his joints creaked into a seated position. “These bones beg to differ. Come here and press my shoulders, Alatus,” he commanded, and Alatus was quick to obey.

“Getting too old for a claymore, are you?” Bosacius grinned, dropping onto his belly and stretching out. “Really, Alatus, I don’t know what we would do without you.”

Alatus drove his knuckles into Bonanus’s ancient trapezius muscles, working to get the tension out. “You defended Jueyan Karst and the adepts for eons before I appeared. You would fight off demons perfectly, I’m sure!”

Bonanus snorted, partially from the massage and partially from scoffing. “Give yourself some more credit, son. I couldn’t have lasted the last few decades without you.”

“It really isn’t much.” The youngest yaksha cast his eyes downward in an attempt to dampen his pride. “Ordinarily, Indarias would be here to help against the demons anyway.”

Menogias tilted her head sideways on the grass, catching Alatus’s eyes. “You know we can’t imagine life without you now, right?”

Alatus smiled, all beautiful teeth, curved pink lips, and shining golden eyes. “Lucky for you, you don’t have to.”

The yaksha sat in silence for a moment, relaxing in each other’s presence, basking in the glory of victory and the comfort of their safe home. Crickets chirped, the waterfall splashed ceaselessly, and Alatus’s fists made soft thudding sounds against Bonanus’s powerful shoulders. The night stretched across the sky, dark curtains held up by pinpoint stars. The only light came from the starlight reflected in the water at the base of the waterfall and the warm glow of Menogias’s skin. The atmosphere was peaceful, and the yaksha almost didn’t notice as Indarias glided to a grinding stop atop the nearby ruin.

“Hello, family. Did I miss something?” Indarias broke the silence. “I brought Jueyan Guoba.” She held up a cloth sack of the spicy snacks.

“Welcome home, Indarias!” Alatus’s face lit up.

Bosacius sighed. “You missed a demon attack, and then ruined a very nice, very rare moment of quiet between us.”

The smell of Jueyan chilies permeated the air and Alatus’s nose as Indarias opened the sack. “Does this make up for it?” She tossed a rice snack to Bosacius, and he caught it in his teeth.

“Sure,” he mumbled between crunches. “I forgive you.”

“There was another demon attack?” Indarias furrowed her eyebrows. “I feel that they have been happening more frequently.”

Menogias helped herself to a guoba and casually licked some chile sauce off of her finger. “They haven’t been more powerful or anything. It’s not difficult to fight them off, just tedious.”

“I don’t know...” The Hydro yaksha shook her head. “Osial stirs. I have a feeling that something, or someone, is just trying to gauge how powerful we are by repeatedly sending waves of demons.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Bosacius crunched down the rest of his guoba and held out his hand for more. “Even if that is the case, they will simply see that we are powerful. Even the adepti respect our power. May I have another guoba?”

Indarias snatched up the bag before Bosacius could reach it. “No! Alatus and Bonanus didn’t have any yet.” She reached in and held out a hot-sauce-slathered disc of rice to Alatus. “They are extra-spicy and therefore extra delicious today.”

“HNGRAK.” Bonanus suddenly let out an earth-shattering snore, and the other yakshas jumped in surprise. Alatus leaped a full meter away, mentally completely alert, hand prepared to summon his spear.

Menogias burst out laughing, but Alatus stayed in his ready position. “What was that??” He asked frantically. “What happened to Bonanus? Is he possessed?”

“No, Alatus, he’s sleeping! Have we never shown you what it is to sleep before?” Menogias cocked her head in surprise.

“He is not possessed?”

“He’s not dead or possessed. He’s resting.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Well...” Indarias thought for a moment. “When humans feel tired, sometimes they fall asleep to recover. We are yaksha, so we recover swiftly without needing to fall asleep.” She looked pointedly at Bonanus, who twitched once and opened his eyes. “I suppose thinking about it, we haven’t actually given you the experience of sleep.”

Bosacius, taking advantage of Indarias’s distraction, sneaked another guoba out of the sack and broke off a piece. “It’s not as if we require it. Sleep is a luxury. Like Jueyan Guoba. We don’t need to eat it to live. We eat it because it’s delicious.” He popped a bit of ham into his mouth, chewing and swallowing quickly. “It is the same with sleeping. We sleep sometimes, because it feels good

and helps us to recover sooner from our battles.”

“I still don’t understand.” Alatus stepped closer to his fellow yaksha again, taking the guoba from Indarias’s hand and biting into it. His teeth sank through the thick-cut cubes of ham and crispy rice crust. The spicy aroma of the chilies warmed him to the core of his brain. “Is sleep something delicious, then? Like food?” He licked his lips, relishing in the sharp flavor.

Bonanus groaned, turning his neck to pop the joint and yawning himself awake. “Would you like to try it, young one? When was the last time we all bothered to sleep?”

Menogias instantly perked up. “Ooh, I would love to go to sleep right now!” She rolled onto her side and was snoring in moments. Alatus couldn’t help but knit his eyebrows, not fully convinced that she was indeed still alive.

Bosacius nodded eagerly, looking at Indarias with pleading eyes that were not unlike a begging dog’s. “We quite literally just fought a battle. There won’t be another one so soon, so we should be safe! Indarias, let him try it.”

Indarias hesitated, and Alatus tried to hide his curiosity. “I would like to try it,” he said softly.

“That settles it, then!” Bonanus stood, proud and full of energy from his momentary nap. “I will stay awake to keep watch, just in case.”

“Is that a good idea? Would you not like to rest some more?” Bosacius asked him.

“Yes, I am sure. A little sleep is still enough for this old body. Trust me to protect you.” His eyes flashed, lively, wise, and confident. “Sleep is indeed delicious. A little luxury will not hurt you, Indarias.”

Indarias sighed. “Fine. I trust you to protect us.”

Bonanus turned, arms folded, and began a steady patrol along the perimeter of Jueyan Karst lake. Alatus watched him disappear from sight before turning back towards the waterfall. Bosacius had fallen on his back again, four hands clasped together, rising and falling with his slow, steady breaths. Indarias, for all her hesitance, had turned to lounge on her stomach, head cradled upon her arms.

Alatus cleared his throat awkwardly. “Indarias.”

“Mhm?” She opened one eye to look at him.

“What do I do?”

Indarias patted the ground. “Lie down, close your eyes, and don’t move. Try not to think of anything, and let yourself relax. When you feel the darkness coming, don’t resist it.”

Alatus slowly rolled his back down against the grass, allowing the shape of himself to sink into its softness. Blades of grass tickled his bare arms, and the warm night breeze caressed his face. He exhaled slowly, trying to call back the quiet moment that had passed earlier. He was safe. He was comfortable. He was tired. Days were spent in efforts to protect their land, and even the demons coming in more frequency were a mystery that was worth reading into. Daily life was tiring. It was nice to lie down, to trust himself to react quickly if there was an emergency, to not have to move for a while.

Indarias began humming his favorite melody, and Alatus allowed his eyelids to flutter shut when

she started singing:

*“When your heart feels heavy,
Let this song carry you away;
When the darkness comes,
Just know that I’ll be here;
Always watching you,
I will be right here.”*

His muscles melted into themselves, and he felt his palms fall softly open at his sides in a way they never could with all his power coursing through them in combat. He smiled, and his mind drifted into light, luxurious sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Link to Indarias’s song: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RV09JXgtsJw>
lyrics by my beta reader <3

sorry this one is shorter, but I needed a break point to give you a fair warning:

Everything goes downhill from here, and it won't get better for a long time. If you just want the family fluff, this might be a good place to stop for you.

But. If you want the rest of Xiao's history. I promise I will make it worth your time.

Thank you for reading :)

When the Darkness Comes

Chapter Summary

The tall figure before him wore heavy red armor, and his long dark hair was pinned up with red strings. His eyes were piercingly bright, but black all the way through, looking up and down at Alatus with a sickening, hungry possessiveness. There was no warmth in him.

He was not a yaksha — of that much Alatus was sure — but he held Alatus's mask in his long, thin fingers, turning it over and over.

“Stand up.” The stranger spoke casually, and his voice was not deep, but the underlying tone of something dangerous and little bit unhinged sent a prickle of unease down Alatus's spine. His legs moved on their own, heavy and stiff, as he fought his way against a standing position.

Chapter Notes

Tw; symptoms of panic attack; kidnapping // ooooooooooh this was stressful

So since we don't actually know what Xiao's canon weakness was, I had to guess. I took some inspiration from selkies and ran with it for the story.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Something was wrong.

Alatus bolted upright. A cold drop of sweat ran down the side of his face. He mentally checked his surroundings. His fellow yaksha were still around him; he still had two arms, two legs, and a complete body; his Anemo Vision clinked against his wrist; he summoned his jade spear, and it appeared instantly at his side.

Something was missing.

He swung his head rapidly from side to side. His teal bangs matted to his clammy neck. Menogias, Bosacius, and Indarias were still scattered about him in various states of sleep. He could even see that Bonanus had returned from his patrol and was snoring quietly under a nearby tree. Their peaceful faces were a stark contrast to Alatus's increasingly rapid heartbeat.

He looked down at his hands and counted his fingers. Sleep was supposed to be relaxing. He'd only done it one time. Why did he feel so wrong?

Something was missing.

Blood pounded in his ears, spinning wildly in his head, crashing in a hurricane against his skull. His nails dug into his palms as he cradled his temples, fighting against the increasing pressure. He

opened his eyes wider, straining his eyelids, forcing himself to focus on the grass below him. Breathe in. Breathe out.

It wasn't working.

Walls closed in around him, even as he grasped at the distant memory that he was outdoors. The grass clouded before his eyes as if he was atop Qinyun Peak in the middle of a rainstorm and the air caught in a tight knot in his chest releasing only in short forced choking and he couldn't see couldn't breathe couldn't think and the walls were getting closer and they weren't there but they were close and *someone was watching him* —

“Quiet.”

Alatus snapped his head up at the unfamiliar voice. All at once, his lungs began inflating and deflating, like someone was stepping onto and off of his chest. His body flooded with oxygen, but it wasn't natural. The air forcing between his lips felt dry and stale, stopping the strangled gasping, but the thunder of his heartbeat did not slow.

“Look at me.” The command was just loud enough that only Alatus would hear it.

The nausea in the pit of Alatus's stomach increased. His hands strained open as if being pulled apart, twitching as he resisted. His nails retracted from his palms, and blood dripped freely down to his fingertips. Against his will, his head turned to face the source of the voice.

The tall figure before him wore heavy red armor, and his long dark hair was pinned up with red strings. His eyes were piercingly bright, but black all the way through, looking up and down at Alatus with a sickening, hungry possessiveness. There was no warmth in him.

He was not a yaksha — of that much Alatus was sure — but he held Alatus's mask in his long, thin fingers, turning it over and over.

“Stand up.” The stranger spoke casually, and his voice was not deep, but the underlying tone of something dangerous and little bit unhinged sent a prickle of unease down Alatus's spine. His legs moved on their own, heavy and stiff, as he fought his way against a standing position.

Bonanus turned over in his sleep, muttering quietly, infuriatingly just out of reach. Alatus opened his mouth to call to him, to scream, to *please, please do something*, but his mouth opened and the sound remained trapped in his throat.

“Ah-ah,” the stranger taunted. “I told you to be quiet. As long as I have this...” He held the mask out. “If my theory is correct, you have to do what I say.”

Alatus's eyes flared in disbelief, darting from the mask in the stranger's hand to his family, sleeping just meters away and yet completely out of range. *Bonanus*, he thought desperately. *Indarias, please, please, please help me. Please wake up.*

The air continued mechanically pushing in and out of his lungs. Every hair on the back of his neck was standing at attention, and his focus jerked to everything he could see. It was all so swimmingly clear, so sharp, he could see all the way to the the bottom of the Karst, every drop in the splash of the waterfall, every leaf on the ginkgo tree, every star in the sky, every plane of Menogias's sleeping face, all if it in perfect quality, *so close and yet too far away*.

Help me.

All of his mental energy went into an attempt to move. His tingling fingers twitched uselessly.

The stranger curved his mouth in a pretentious smile. “Alatus, was it?” His armor clinked as he took a step forward. “You’re going to be my bloodhound.” He pushed Alatus’s hair back off his sweaty forehead, and Alatus shivered.

Please help me.

The silent cry must have shown in his expression, because the stranger narrowed his eyes and seized his chin harshly, yanking his face upwards. His fingers were cold and damp, and his nails were sharp. He smiled, but there was no emotion behind it. “Don’t be afraid of me, Alatus. I will teach you more about your powers than any of your guardians could. I will show you just how strong you actually are. I will train you to resist so many things, and maybe someday to overcome even this weakness.” He casually tossed Alatus’s mask into the air and caught it again without breaking eye contact. “I will take good care of you.”

No. Fire blazed in Alatus’s eyes. His teeth ground together in frustration as he bit his lip, hard. He squeezed his eyes shut tight and moved his head from side to side slightly, shaking from the exertion of the motion.

The stranger retracted his hand, no longer smiling. “I see that you’re going to be difficult about this, but trust me. One day you’ll be grateful.” He summoned a flat red sword and swung it once in his hand. “There was something funny the blue yaksha told you earlier. It was something like...” He cocked his head thoughtfully. “... When you feel the darkness coming, don’t resist it.” He turned the sword so the blade faced downwards in his hand.

WAKE UP SOMEONE PLEASE HELP ME. Alatus screamed, but only the gasp of his mechanical breath escaped his lips.

Bosacius let out a loud snore. He scratched his shoulder and turned away onto his side.

That was the last thing Alatus saw before the hilt of the red sword made contact with the back of his neck and everything went dark.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Alatus, wake up.”

The command snapped Alatus back into consciousness, proving to him that his nightmare was indeed living.

He kept his eyes shut tight.

A freezing polished floor was beneath him, pressing into his spine, seeping cold into his tunic, so different from the summer-warmed grass he was used to. The air was clean, but not in the way that fresh wind was clean; the air was scoured and sterile, as if it was only landfill fumes that had been heavily scented to cover up its true nature, and it stung his nose as he took breath after shaky breath. He flexed his fingers, grateful to realize that he had regained control of his own body.

A clink of armor echoed as the stranger sighed and shifted impatiently. “I won’t make you, Alatus, but I want you to open your eyes.”

Alatus feigned deafness. How did this man know his name? And why did he think he had the right to use it? *Who was he, anyway?*

“Hm.” Another clink. “Open your eyes. *Now.*”

Alatus's eyelids wrenched open, and he found himself staring at a ceiling for the first time in his hundred years of life. The room, or what he assumed was a room, was dimly lit by a few furnace pyres where the walls met. The ceiling was extremely high, black volcanic stone, absorbing all the light that could reach it, and he instantly felt claustrophobic. After so many years of stars, clouds, and sunlight, even the expansive indoor space was suffocating. Anxiety pooled in the center of Alatus's chest and spread to the base of his throat.

He turned his head to the side, and his hair spilled over his eyes, offering a momentary relief from the overwhelming anxiety. "Who are you?" he managed to ask, although the question sounded more like a whisper.

"Ah! He speaks!" The stranger clapped his hands once, and the sound resonated off the black stone walls, making Alatus wince. "I go by many names. The most common one is Zhui. I am the god of Karma." He smiled and waved. Alatus did not smile back. "But you..." He took several steps forward and leaned towards the yaksha's still form. "You will be calling me Master."

Alatus pulled himself slowly into a sitting position, rubbing the back of his neck where the sword hilt had hit him. He did not break eye contact. "I will never, *never* call you master. Not as long as I'm alive. Take me back to my family."

The smile on Zhui's face cut deeper into his cheekbones. "Your... family." He forced the word as if it left an unpleasant taste in his mouth. "Family. Those yaksha that babied you your whole life? The ones that told you that you're something special and then hid that specialness away for themselves? Those yaksha that didn't even let you experience sleep until you were over a century old?" He scoffed. "You call those *failures* your *family*?"

"They're not failures!" Alatus summoned his spear in a blink and hurled it as hard as he could towards the archon. He was on his feet a second later, rushing after it. He was fast enough. He could be strong enough to take on this psychopath who dared to call himself a god. He had to, had to be fast enough, had to escape this room, had to see his family had to punish this reprobate for daring to take him away from them —

"Stop." Alatus's mask appeared suddenly in Zhui's hand.

Alatus crashed to a halt, his spear stopping just one tiny inch from Zhui's neck. His body shook from the effort as he tried to push it forward just one. More. Inch.

Zhui stared at him blankly, as if the all-powerful jade spear was just a minor inconvenience. "It's funny that you still think you can resist me," he commented with almost an indulgent smile that infuriated Alatus more. He held up the mask, just out of reach. "Whether you like it or not, my dear Alatus, I control your body. I control your motions." He reached out and patted Alatus's head as if he was a disobedient dog, and Alatus fought to recoil. "I'm sure there are limitations, but right now, I don't see any problems!" He walked away from the point of the spear, pulling it harshly from the yaksha's clenched fist. "I'll be taking that."

"Why me?" Alatus tried to spit the words, but his anger was slowly being overcome by terror. "Why not take all of us? Why are you doing this to me?"

"Aw." Zhui's lips moved into a pout. "Would you believe that I chose you because I think you're beautiful?" He rolled his eyes when Alatus glared at him. "I guess not. No, I chose you because you're *powerful*, more powerful than you or your yaksha could imagine right now." He placed a cold hand on Alatus's strained forearm and frowned. "I'm sorry, I didn't realize that you could feel the effect this much. Relax — that's an order."

Alatus collapsed like a puppet that had its strings cut, and Zhui caught him in his arms. Fear flared again at the feeling of Zhui's creeping cold arms against his shoulders, and he shivered with his whole body.

If Zhui noticed Alatus's discomfort, he didn't acknowledge it. "Right now, you are wasted potential. The yaksha did fine without you, and yet they kept you to themselves so that they could do less work. You think they cared about you, but the reality is that if they really wanted the best for you, they would have taught you *everything* about yourself." He looked down at Alatus, black eyes almost earnest, and Alatus fought the urge to look away. "I will make you into something useful."

"I don't get a choice in this?" Alatus asked. "What if I don't *want* to be useful? I don't want any of this. I want to go home. I want to get out of here. I want you to leave me alone!"

Tears of frustration and desperation started forming in Alatus's eyes, melting his golden irises. He had never been so completely powerless. His spear was gone, his body was no longer his own, and he had no backup. He couldn't even be certain that his fellow yaksha knew where he was, or even if they knew he was missing at all.

Zhui wiped his thumb under Alatus's lashline, examining the moisture with a casual indifference. "Karma manifests itself in different ways, Alatus. This is your first lesson with me." He snapped his fingers. A long, thick iron chain flew out from the wall, and Zhui caught it easily in his hand. "Karma, you should know, is the idea that good things will happen to good people, and bad things will happen to bad people." He swung open the shackle on the end of the chain and closed it with a bruising snap around Alatus's wrist, smiling in satisfaction when Alatus's eyes widened in terror. "Unfortunately for everyone in the world, there is no such thing as a truly good person." He held out his other hand. Another chain shot out from the opposite wall, and he fastened it around Alatus's free wrist. "There are no good people; therefore, there is no good karma." He released Alatus's shoulders, allowing him to hang by his arms, standing unsteadily on the balls of his feet. "You can move if you would like to."

Control returned to Alatus, and he stood upright and immediately yanked on the chains. They were thick and completely solid, pulled tight to force him to remain centered in the room. The iron chafed against his skin, burning cold and uncomfortable. It was almost worse than having his will taken away, now having the illusion of freedom without truly gaining anything at all. He sent a wave of elemental power through the metal to no effect. The chains must have been enchanted somehow. "Why do this if you can control me?" It had only been a few moments, and the weight of the iron was starting to strain his shoulders. "Take it off!"

Zhui's black eyes flashed with a sudden bolt of rage. A third chain dropped from the ceiling and he wrapped it around Alatus's neck, just tight enough that he would not be able to forget it was there, and pulled him forward. "You. Do not ever. Get to tell me what to do." He delivered the quiet words calmly, casually, through clenched teeth, and flecks of spit flew from between his thin lips.

Alatus swallowed hard. The iron bit his skin as his throat expanded. "I'm sorry." The words were barely a whimper.

The fire faded from Zhui's eyes, and he sighed and released the chain. "No, I'm sorry. It's a fair question. I did tell you I was going to teach you." He paced a few steps backwards, as if he hadn't just put Alatus in the worst pain of his life.

"As I was saying, karma manifests itself in different ways, and there is no good karma. Even the best of people with the best of intentions make terrible decisions, usually thinking that they're helping some kind of greater good, but someone eventually will have to take the consequences of

those actions.” He snapped at the polished blackstone floor. Two more chains rose up to clasp Alatus’s ankles, and he gasped from the new sensation.

“But why,” he choked, “are you doing this to me?” The new chains had not made a difference in Alatus’s posture, but the increasing feeling of helplessness was devastating. Any glimmer of hope that he’d had from receiving control back was thoroughly destroyed.

“I’m getting to that!” Zhui snapped. Sparks and the smell of burning hair filled the air, and Zhui impatiently smoothed a few flames out of his hands. “I’m sorry, I just really do not appreciate being interrupted. Do not interrupt me again. Am I clear?” He sighed, fire subsiding.

Alatus, afraid to speak again, barely managed to nod, looking downwards in attempt to decrease the strangling feeling.

“Good!” Zhui smiled. “So the karmic consequences on your soul take the form of red binds. They are not physical, strictly speaking, so it’s impossible to say what they truly are. All I know is, they will restrain you in a similar fashion that I have you strung up here.” He gestured vaguely. “My logic is, if you could get used to the feeling of those karmic binds in your physical body, handling the effect of karma on your soul will be like feeling nothing at all.” He seized a handful of Alatus’s hair, hard enough that the yaksha cried out in pain, and pulled his head upright, forcing him to look him in the eye. He smiled, not bothering to hide the sinister lilt in his voice. “You are strong. You can handle karmic fate. And if I train you enough, you will handle it for a long, long time. I have a lot of enemies, Alatus. A lot of people I want off of this mortal plane. And you are going to take care of that for me.” He let go of Alatus’s hair and took a few cheerful steps, all the malice gone, replaced by a manic sort of sick joy.

Focus on breathing, Alatus thought. *There is enough air in the room. You are not choking. You are not completely powerless. This is not happening. This is a bad dream. You will never go to sleep again. Sleeping is a terrible idea. Sleeping is the worst thing that could happen. Dreams and nightmares are the worst things that could happen. You hate sleep...*

... But it was not your idea to sleep in the first place.

Alatus’s eyes misted over, and he forced his mind to go blank. His gaze dropped to the floor. There was only himself, the light, and the air. There was nothing else. Nothing else. Nothing to think about. Nothing to wonder. No one to blame.

The manic smile on Zhui’s face deepened, as if he could feel Alatus’s train of thought. “I didn’t lie, you know. I do think you are extraordinarily beautiful. I doubt that even Morax himself has seen a sight quite like you. But this...” He looked Alatus up and down, examining his new possession. “This is a sight that is just for me. I will turn you into something even better than what you are now. I will give you the treatment you deserve.” He patted Alatus’s cheek, and Alatus pulled away from him as far as the chains would allow. “I will take *good* care of you.”

He turned and sashayed out the door. Blackrock closed with a slam behind him, leaving the yaksha totally, crushingly alone for the very first time in his life.

Chapter End Notes

fun fact: i named Zhui after this Chinese character 罪

i am aware that it should be Zui but the h just looked better...

Right, so don't ever let anyone treat you this way.

further down the hill we go~

Testing the Limits

Chapter Summary

“I need you to understand something, you innocent, stupid, naive little thing.” Zhui moved his face closer to Alatus’s. “I am not a cruel master. There are plenty of archons and even humans out there who would do much worse things to you. Would you prefer me to give you to them?” His eyes flashed, a glimpse of red in the black abyss. “I can think of gods who would make you stand in fire until your flesh charred down to your bones, or hold yourself under water until your lungs screamed for air, or find some other more... creative... ways to use your body...” He reached out and drew a line down the side of Alatus’s face with the tip of his nail guard.

Alatus jumped away, heart pounding, skin tingling where the cold armor had touched him, shock and dread shooting through his body in a whole new level of horror.

Zhui easily crossed the space between them and grabbed Alatus’s face, crushing his jawbone between his thumb and fingers. “So many wonder what it would be like to end you, such a powerful being, but I am the only one who does not. I am the only one who can protect you. I am your protector now, and you will do what I say.”

Chapter Notes

Tw: gaslighting, implied threat of assault

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alatus couldn’t tell how much time had passed by the time Zhui finally came back. For all he knew, it could have been anywhere from just a few hours to a few weeks. The fires in the room had gone out, leaving Alatus in the near pitch dark. The blackstone of the room glowed red, barely illuminating the room, but the looming largeness and suffocating quiet were all the more obvious. All he could hear were the resounding rattles of the chains and the panicked breaths that didn’t even seem like his own anymore.

It was almost a relief to no longer be alone.

The archon snapped his fingers. The chains released from Alatus’s limbs. He crumpled to the floor, gasping as the blood rushed back into his arms. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Zhui looked down at him as if he were a minor obstacle that just happened to be on the floor. “You’re stronger than this,” he said mildly. “Over time, you will get used to it.”

Alatus glared daggers at the archon’s black armored feet. His shoulders ached, and the cold floor was a welcome coolant on his back as he turned over. He exhaled shakily, breath finally began to steady. In. Out.

“Oh, come on.” Zhui rolled his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest, tapping one finger against

the back of his gauntlet. “I want to take you outside today, and I can’t if you don’t stop being dramatic.”

Alatus’s eyes widened, and he sat upright, bracing his fist on the floor. “I can go outside?” He was going outside. He could see the sky again. He could run away.

“Yes!” Zhui smiled, and the expression was almost kind — then he summoned Alatus’s mask, spinning it in his fingers the way he liked to do, and instantly dashed all of Alatus’s hopes. “I told you before, Alatus. I can teach you things you never knew you could do and show you how strong you really are. You have been held back, and you have been holding back, but I can help you find out where your limits truly are.”

By this point, the tingle of dread in Alatus’s spine was almost familiar, but he looked up at the archon with fire and hate in his eyes. “I won’t do it. I won’t do anything you tell me to do. And I don’t care if you force me, because no matter what you make my body do, I cannot possibly reach my ‘potential,’ or what say you, if I am not trying.” He willed his legs to stand and lifted his chin defiantly.

Zhui’s face flushed in irritation, though his smile did not fade. “This is for your own good, Alatus. In order to survive, you have to be strong.” He took a casual step forward, and Alatus forced himself not to flinch. “Think of your fellow yaksha. Think of how they have said that they are nothing without you. Isn’t it unfair for them to rely so heavily on you? As old and slow as they are, would you not benefit from being stronger? Would you not be able to protect them better?”

Alatus shook his head. “I am strong enough. I do not need you or whatever it is you think I am.” He resisted the urge to reach out and shove the archon away from him.

Zhui stared back coldly. He was no longer smiling. “I need you to understand something, you innocent, stupid, *naive* little thing.” He moved his face closer to Alatus’s, so close that he could smell the putrid stench of burning hair and rot on the god’s breath. “I am *not* a cruel master. There are plenty of archons and even humans out there who would do much worse things to you. Would you prefer me to give you to them?” His eyes flashed, a glimpse of red in the black abyss. “I can think of gods who would make you stand in fire until your flesh charred down to your bones, or hold yourself under water until your lungs screamed for air, or find some other more... creative... ways to use your body...” He reached out and drew a line down the side of Alatus’s face with the tip of his nail guard.

Alatus jumped away, heart pounding, skin tingling where the cold armor had touched him, shock and dread shooting through his body in a whole new level of horror.

Zhui easily crossed the space between them and grabbed Alatus’s face, crushing his jawbone between his thumb and fingers. His nail guard dug into the soft flesh of Alatus’s cheek. “Would you prefer to be with those gods?” He hissed, and the burning hair smell grew stronger. Alatus shook his head no, and the nail guard punctured his skin. The blood began to flow, but still Zhui pressed harder. “So many wonder what it would be like to end you, such a powerful being, but I am the only one who does not. I am the only one who can protect you. I am your protector now, and you *will* do what I say.” He shoved Alatus back down to the floor and shook the blood off of his hand.

The yaksha’s blood flew off Zhui’s nail guard and splattered against the stone, inches away from Alatus’s hand. Alatus had sustained much worse injuries before, but the words of the archon had hurled straight into the pit of his chest and detonated there. What was worse than fire? What was worse than drowning? He didn’t want to find out, now or ever. How could he become strong enough to make sure he would never be subject to that kind of treatment? He felt his brain start to

spin in his skull, and he dropped his head into his hands. *There is enough air for you to breathe. You are not powerless. This is not happening.*

“What will it be, then? Will you let me teach and protect you, or would you rather be used and abused by someone else?” Zhui asked. He still held Alatus’s mask tightly in one hand, and Alatus could feel his grip around his own soul.

When Zhui exited the room, Alatus followed with his head bowed.

◇ ◇ ◇

The expanse of Zhui’s blackstone castle would have been impressive to any passerby, but the sight of the stars in the night sky was the most beautiful thing Alatus could have seen. He sucked in the fresh night air like he couldn’t get enough of it, staring hungrily at the sky as though he was starving, feeling the warm breeze caress his stone-cold skin and cover him with goosebumps. Oxygen flooded his veins, and he felt the Anemo energy rise in his blood. It was perfect, he thought, to be outside again. *I never want to be apart from the sky again.*

Then he frowned. A streak of panic shot through his mind.

I do not recognize these stars.

Over a hundred years of studying star patterns should have covered every possible perspective of the sky. He spun in a circle. The terrain around him was unfamiliar and rocky in the worst way. The stars, as beautiful as they were, stretched on endlessly in the swirls of milky purple and teal light. He could smell salt, algae, and metal, like old Mora coins he pulled out of the sea, but there was no water around. The thoughts of distant humans registered in his brain, but he couldn’t understand the language. “Where are we?” Alatus demanded.

“Hm.” Zhui hummed, looking at the stars thoughtfully as if he didn’t know the answer. “Teyvat is a nation that was turned upside down. We have pocket dimensions, sub-domains, and all kinds of inexplicable things. Karma, by all definitions a concept and a concept alone, has a color and a texture. And yet, you ask me questions such as ‘where.’” He shook his head. The red beads at the ends of his long hair scraped roughly against his armor. “We are somewhere safe. Far enough that none of your yaksha will find you, but also not so far that there is no one for you to practice on.”

Alatus clenched his fists. Heat rose in his chest, but he pressed his emotion down. “They will find me. They won’t rest until they know where I am, and then you’ll be in trouble.”

Zhui cocked his head and smirked. “Are you so certain? We’ll see about that.” He placed his cold hands on Alatus’s shoulders. “Let’s start with something simple, shall we?”

“What do you mean?” Alatus shrugged the unwelcome touch away.

“You are familiar with killing hilichurls, aren’t you?” The archon stretched his arm out in front of the castle, and a totem rose up from the rocky ground. Zhui shot a bolt of fire towards it, igniting it with Pyro energy. A small mob of hilichurls appeared, grunting and shouting in the way that they did, bonking their clubs periodically against their wooden shields.

Alatus stumbled backwards, but Zhui’s hands landed on his back and pushed him forward. “Go on, then. This is nothing you have not done before.”

“This is not the same!” Alatus protested. Fog passed overhead, drowning the starlight and casting gray shadows across the land. “These hilichurls aren’t possessed by anything. They aren’t even attacking us.”

“That doesn’t matter.” Zhui summoned a spear, a simple black tassel, and thrust it into Alatus’s hand. “They will in a moment. And unless you want your downfall to be because of a few hilichurls, you will kill them. *Now.*”

The last word was an order.

Alatus braced himself against the forced motion he was sure was coming — but he relaxed his muscles in confusion when nothing happened.

“*Ya yika!*” A hilichurl screeched.

“Huh.” Zhui slapped the mask in his hand. The ceramic made a grating sound against his iron gauntlet, and he rolled his eyes. “I suppose that kind of command is not specific enough.” He sighed and looked upwards pointedly. “Regardless, they will attack you in a moment. Defend yourself.”

True to his word, the hilichurls turned and rushed at Alatus, screeching loudly. “*Nini zido!*”

The weight of the black tassel was heavier and more awkward than the light jade spear Alatus was used to, but he spun it in his hand once. “Work with me,” he whispered to it, tapping the end against the ground to get a feel for its length. A hilichurl approached, swinging its club wildly. Alatus easily sidestepped the attack and slashed the spear downwards, knocking the hilichurl over and away. Its own shield made its fall heavier, and it disintegrated from its own fall damage.

“Do not hold back,” Zhui encouraged him. “I have watched you destroy at least seven hilichurls in one blow. Don’t make me say it again.”

Alatus gritted his teeth, but he gathered his Anemo energy in a dash attack straight into the midst of the rushing mob, once, twice, three times. The hilichurls did not have even a moment to recover, bursting into sparks and dropping their broken masks left and right as they fell.

“Amazing!!” Zhui laughed, clapping like a child. “But you’re not done yet.” He pointed at the last hilichurl, which somehow hadn’t learned anything from its brethren and was pawing at the ground in preparation to attack. “I want you to do your plunging attack.”

“I can’t do that attack without my mask.” Alatus straightened, panting from the effort of the dash attacks, brushing sparks from his clothes before they could singe.

“Don’t give me that.” Zhui snapped, mood shifting quickly from joy to irritation. “Let me teach you — if you start from a higher point than the hilichurl, you will have the time to turn and do your plunge attack. You do not need the mask to do anything.”

... *Except to control my own body*, Alatus thought bitterly. He kept his gaze on the hilichurl digging a pyro slime from the ground.

“Climb on the totem, and plunge attack from there.” The anger melted from Zhui’s voice, returning to an indulgent encouragement. “You can do it. I know you can do it.”

It wasn’t an order, but Alatus felt a surge of curiosity. The Pyro totem was only a couple of heads taller than Alatus was. He had never tried pulling off a plunging attack from such a short distance, but he had no evidence to prove that he was incapable of it. He gripped the stone edge and pulled himself up, just as the hilichurl’s pyro slime hit the base of the totem, and did a couple of careful test jumps. He was only about two meters away from the ground. Was that enough height?

“Quickly, now!” Zhui tapped his nail guard against his red armor impatiently. Alatus wondered

distantly if he ever put that armor to use.

He jumped up with as much force as he could, vaulting off the end of his spear, turned on its momentum so that he was in diving position, and plunged the spear in a spin right over the hilichurl. The wind whipped his hair against his face, it roared in his ears, he plummeted, he was too close to the ground, it wasn't going to work, *he was going to miss* —

The hilichurl rattled as the Anemo energy dispersed through its body. The spear had split it from between its horns all the way into the ground. It froze for a moment before disintegrating into sparks, letting out one last ear-piercing shriek.

“I did it,” Alatus breathed. Adrenaline from the jump was still rushing through him, and he laughed for the first time in what felt like ages. “It was so fast! It was so fast, and I didn't think I could do it, but then I turned, and I did it!”

“I knew you could do it,” Zhui said, smiling. “Do you see now, the things that you can do?”

Alatus nodded, forgetting where he was, forgetting who he was with, and his natural gentle curiosity overcame all the terror he had felt just moments before. “What else can I do?” He laughed again, and the sweet sound filled the air.

“So many things,” Zhui murmured, his pure black eyes shining. The sun started to come up over the horizon of the rocky wasteland, and the archon watched as Alatus turned to face it, slamming the spear into the ground and allowing it to dematerialize. “Amazing. What a beautiful laugh.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes i am aware that you cannot climb on the elemental totems, whatever i'm allowed to have artistic license // also i definitely didn't walk kaeya up to a totem to guess how tall one is // and i definitely don't headcanon (it's totally canon) that kaeya is 6'4 :3

the chapters do be getting longer and longer. Thank you for reading ~ we really in for it now :)

The Limit

Chapter Summary

“How are you feeling, Alatus?” Zhui asked, casually. Gently. His voice dripped with false kindness and care. “Can you hear your heartbeat? Are you sweating from the heat, or from fear?”

The iron was just hot enough to be uncomfortable under Alatus’s hands. “I. Am. Fine,” he forced out, fingers twitching with the effort to pull away.

Zhui cocked his head. “We’ll see how long that lasts.” He flexed his fingers, and pure Pyro energy blazed from his gauntlet and flooded the yaksha’s body.

Alatus screamed.

Chapter Notes

tw: gaslighting and burn torture // seriously don't let anyone treat you this way and if you need to talk im here :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sun rose higher into the sky, and Zhui pushed Alatus to try things he had never tried before. He learned that the higher he jumped from, the more damage his plunging attack would cause, and that if he could herd the hilichurls together, he could attack more efficiently without using too much energy. It was exciting, succeeding at everything he tried, but the hours passed, and Alatus was starting to slow.

He was panting and sweating by the time the sun was at its highest and hottest. His white clothes were slightly singed from the places that hilichurl slimes had brushed him, and his muscles were sore from the endless fighting. Zhui mercilessly activated the totem for what felt like the hundredth time, and Alatus barely had a second to breathe before yet another hilichurl rushed at him. Even a minute, just one minute, would have been enough for him to gather energy. If he could just rest for a minute...

“There are worse things in the world than hilichurls, Alatus,” Zhui told him. “Abyss mages, regisvines, hypostases... Things you probably don’t even know about, like oceanids and wolf mimics... Nice one!” He grinned as Alatus dodged and swiped his spear around him in a perfect circle, knocking back and disintegrating five hilichurls at once. “Things you do not even know about! It is in your best interest to build your stamina the way you are now, so one day you will be able to fight the greater threats out there.”

Alatus made a wry face, breathing hard as he dashed at the last hilichurl, flicking the shield from its claws as he spun his spear before crashing the head down against the hilichurl’s body. Finally.

“Well done, Alatus!” Zhui praised him, clapping, clinking his bright armor that for whatever

reason he still wore under the beating sun. The glinting red hurt Alatus's eyes more.

He dropped onto the sun-baked sheet of rock beneath him and cradled his sweating face in his equally sweaty hands. His eyes burned when his eyelids slid shut over them, vision red from heat and light. It had been fun for a moment, when the adrenaline and endorphins were really flowing, but his energy was well past depleted. He breathed in deeply, all the way to the bottom of his diaphragm, and exhaled slowly, feeling the exhaustion slowly leave his limbs.

"Don't tell me you're tired." He heard the clank of armor as Zhui folded his arms. "I still want more from you, Alatus."

The yaksha winced at the thought. "I don't want to hear you say my name," he muttered.

"What was that?"

Zhui was in front of Alatus in an instant, pulling his head up by his hair, yanking his face forward. He stabbed his nail guard up under Alatus's chin, pressing sharply against his skin. "Do you care to repeat that?"

Alatus opened his tired eyes. Zhui's expression was a threat in and of itself, but Alatus was too drained to really care. "I hate. The sound. Of you saying my name."

Fire blazed in Zhui's eyes. The gauntlet in Alatus's hair started to heat up, and the air around them started to steam. Sweat evaporated off of Alatus's skin, but he held Zhui's gaze with his own cold stare, bracing himself for whatever might come.

"Hm." Zhui pulled away, and Alatus blinked. The anger was still deep in his soulless eyes. "Do you feel rested?"

Alatus rubbed his chin where the nail guard had been. He usually healed quickly, but the mark left on his cheek from the morning was only just starting to disappear. It would make sense that wounds caused by archons would be harder to heal than wounds caused by hilichurls or slimes. He took another deep breath, expanding his chest as far as he could before forcing his lungs empty. He felt his Anemo energy replenish, if even just a little bit. "No. I don't feel rested."

The statement was not a lie.

"Mm." Zhui stood upright. "Alatus. Have you ever killed a human before?"

He shook his head. "No. Humans have done nothing to deserve death. When they appear, they do not attack, and there is no reason to hurt one." He rubbed his dry eyes. Why did he bother sharing all of that? He bit his lower lip, hard.

"You are wrong." Zhui walked back towards the totem. His iron gauntlet was still smoking. "I have seen the karma that humans build up. They're disgusting creatures, really — they think twisted thoughts constantly, they hate each other, they steal from each other — I don't know what the appeal to them is at all." His voice was thick with scorn. "They destroy the land to build their little villages, and they establish their little seven-starred government, and they worship Morax with their little incense burners, as if they are worth the precious time of an archon!"

The sun was overwhelmingly warm now. Alatus could feel the back of his neck start to burn. "They don't hurt me," he said through his teeth. "And I don't hurt them."

Zhui went on as if Alatus hadn't spoken at all. "They have so much bad karma that if I were to hit this totem while channeling their sins, I could actually bring some humans here." The smoking

gauntlet burst into flames. “When I do, you will exterminate them.”

Fury raged in Alatus’s skin, hotter than the sunshine. “I will not.”

Zhui summoned Alatus’s mask and tapped it. “I can make you.”

Alatus bit his lip harder. He could taste blood. He had sworn never to kill a human; he had promised Bosacius, *Bosacius made him swear not to kill a human*. He couldn’t give in now.

“But I won’t.” Zhui said airily, surprising him.

Alatus shook his head in confusion. “What?”

“I won’t make you. I won’t have to make you.” Zhui leered, and his eyes gleamed psychotically. “You are going to beg me to let you kill a human.”

Dread pooled behind Alatus’s eyes. “Never,” he spat, rising to his feet and taking a step back.

Zhui smiled deeper. His teeth were sharp and long; for the first time, Alatus realized that they were placed in rows. He tapped the mask again. “Come here.”

It was an order.

Alatus fought against his disobedient legs, stalking awkwardly until he was an arm’s length from the archon. Zhui held up his gauntlet, extinguishing the flames into thick black smoke. “Hold on to this, and don’t let go.”

Another order.

Alatus’s shaking hands reached up to wrap around the archon’s armored wrist. He swallowed, dry mouth doing nothing to help his dry throat.

“How are you feeling, Alatus?” Zhui asked, casually. Gently. His voice dripped with false kindness and care. “Can you hear your heartbeat? Are you sweating from the heat, or from fear?”

The iron was just hot enough to be uncomfortable under Alatus’s hands. “I. Am. Fine,” he forced out, fingers twitching with the effort to pull away.

Zhui cocked his head. “We’ll see how long that lasts.” He flexed his fingers, and pure Pyro energy blazed from his gauntlet and flooded the yaksha’s body.

Alatus screamed.

The fire was *inside him*, burning his organs, scorching every nerve, thrashing his heart against the walls of his chest. His whole body arched, fighting to get away from the archon, searing torment making his muscles spasm in every direction. He couldn’t see past the red energy that enveloped him, couldn’t hear past his own screaming, couldn’t think...

When it finally stopped, he couldn’t even collapse. He squeezed his eyes shut tight, slumping backwards as far as he was able, gasping for air that barely entered his frying lungs. “Please.” He coughed, tasting soot as well as blood. He pulled on his arms again. The tendons in his knuckles stood out sharply from his hands, still locked around Zhui’s gauntlet. “Please let me go.”

“This is for your own good, Alatus.” Zhui pulsed the Pyro energy again, just for a moment, and Alatus’s body seized. “When you’re working for me, you’ll have to kill all kinds of things, humans included. I can’t let a little sense of subjective morals get in the way, can I, *Alatus*?”

“I really,” Alatus forced the words through the blood in his mouth, “cannot stand it when you say my name.”

He screamed again, for longer this time, as Zhui burned him again. Fire roared in his ears, blood streaming, vision starting to blur and darken at the edges. Salt in his tears stung his skin. The pit of his chest ached as the screams were torn from it, he could feel his consciousness ripping away, can't focus can't breathe DO NOT FALL ASLEEP can't stand it

Even the ground under his feet was agony. His whole body trembled. He couldn't even remember what the sun felt like. “Stop.” His voice rasped, more like a whimper than anything else.

“I would, if you would let me.” Zhui sounded almost sorry. “You made me do this. I just want what is good for you, Alatus, but you keep fighting me.” He lifted Alatus's face with his free hand, looking into his bloodshot golden eyes with something like fondness. “I won't ever make you kill someone that does not deserve it. You have the power to do so much. All you have to do is submit to me, and I can stop the fire.”

Alatus could feel his lips cracking. He could barely keep his eyes open, let alone string a thought together. His breaths were shallow, pathetic drags of oxygen into his ruined lungs. He could see the blisters forming on his arms, breaking up the once-neat pattern of green yaksha markings on his skin. This was pain. This was what hell felt like. This was dying. When the fire filled him a third time, his scorched throat hardly made any sound, but the near-silent cries shredded what little remained of his energy.

“Hm.” Zhui spoke under his breath. “I knew your screams would be better than your laugh.”

Alatus dropped to his knees when the pulse finally passed, and the baked rock below him hissed as it took the heat from his body. His arms yanked his shoulders upwards, begging to let go. In the back of his mind, he could distantly remember someone, something important, something that should stop him from speaking, but it was all too far away; he just needed no more, no more, *no more, stop, anything, PLEASE...*

“Master.” The word was an exhale. “Please. Let me serve you. Let me kill for you. *Please.*”

Zhui huffed a breath through his nose, smiling in satisfaction. “You can let go.”

Blessedly, Alatus's hands dropped from Zhui's gauntlet. He instantly covered his eyes with his palms, letting his tears sting the boiled skin, Anemo energy focused on cooling his own blood, taking slow breaths that lifted the dead skin in his throat back and forth like grass in the wind. Tiny breath in. Tiny breath out. He braced his elbows, leaning forward, not noticing when his hair brushed the gravel in front of him.

“Can you stand?” Zhui asked. His voice was far, far away.

“Yes.” Alatus responded, bracing one hand against the rock.

“Can you fight?”

No. “Yes.”

“Good.” Zhui reached out towards the totem, blasting it with a firebolt that was much stronger than all the ones previous.

Three humans, men in colorful foreign clothing, appeared in small puffs of smoke. They instantly started making noises of confusion, spinning around wildly, pointing in random directions and

shouting at each other. Alatus couldn't understand a word they were saying.

"Hurry up, before they throw down their little smoke bombs and escape!" Zhui called, drumming his fingers on the totem. "Do you need some motivation?"

NO.

He summoned his spear. It appeared in his hand, and he winced as the blisters in his right hand popped against the smooth handle. The cold metal soothed his skin, just a little.

It was too easy. He couldn't consider this a fight. The humans shouted as they ran. They didn't have weapons. They didn't fight back. They just looked at the two divine beings as they scrambled away, excited fear in their eyes. Two of them ran too close together, one right in front of the other. Alatus hurled his spear after them. Once again, some voice scratched in his mind, but he just watched blankly as the black tassel skewered the humans together, and they fell forward into the rocks.

Right. He had to retrieve his spear. He walked towards it. Behind him, the third human shouted again, but Alatus moved purposefully. He was in no hurry. The human couldn't outrun him, couldn't escape anywhere in this rocky hell, he was just as stuck as he was...

He pulled the spear from the two human bodies. It was odd that their bodies didn't disintegrate the way that hilichurls did. Humans left bodies behind, and skeletons, and...

Blood.

Blood.

Alatus's eyes widened in realization. *He had just full-on massacred two humans.*

He turned and bolted towards the last human, who had run awkwardly a good distance away from the totem pole. Zhui cheered, but Alatus didn't hear it. "Please, please, please," he whispered, dashing forwards. He was at the man's heels in no time, reaching out with the handle of his spear, tripping the man just enough that he went sprawling against the gravel.

The human turned on his back and kicked at the dirt, begging and pleading in his language.

"Go. Quickly." Alatus rasped. He made a shoo-ing motion with his hand and dematerialized his spear. "Please, get away." Somewhere behind him, he could hear Zhui screaming in anger. "*Go.*"

A flash of understanding crossed the man's face. He put his hands together in front of him, a respectful gesture, before lifting and throwing down what Alatus assumed was a smoke pellet. He threw up his arms, barely feeling the heat of the smoke in the rush of relief that washed over him. *The human got away, he was safe, everything was okay —*

"Alatus." Zhui's breath was right at his ear.

He inhaled shakily, still feeling the effect of the burns on his eyelids, and turned.

Zhui looked surprisingly calm; pensive, even. He blinked, and his black eyes were thoughtful. "You can probably do that, too. You can probably teleport." He looked at the spot where the human had disappeared. "Perhaps just short distances. But if you can dash attack, you can definitely teleport."

Alatus furrowed his eyebrows. What..?

Zhui tossed Alatus's yaksha mask up in the air, catching it lightly, like it was just a trinket to him.

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The blackstone room no longer felt like torture to Alatus. The cold floor and the shelter from the hot sun were welcome, welcome, welcome. Zhui made him lie down on a blackstone block he lifted from the floor before releasing control back to him.

Alatus didn't think he could handle moving, anyway. He let himself sink against the freezing surface, sighing softly as the block leached the heat from his ruined skin.

Zhui had removed his red armor in favor of a simple red hanfu. He hummed as he moved around the blackstone room, igniting the pyres in the corners, illuminating the room with firelight. Alatus winced at that, but firelight was better than no light.

"I think that there is something you didn't consider, Alatus." It was the first thing Zhui had said since they returned to the castle, other than commanding the yaksha to follow him. "You let that human go, but you did not think about what he could do to hurt you."

Alatus turned his head, taking a sharp breath at the pain of the motion. "He couldn't hurt me."

"You say that because you are not thinking." Zhui returned to the side of the block, arms folded. "You don't think. You never think. That's why you need me to think for you." He procured a small glass jar from the inside of his long hanfu sleeve. "Don't move."

He took Alatus's arm in his hand, and Alatus flinched from the unwelcome touch. "What are you doing?"

Zhui opened the jar and started dabbing a fresh-scented substance on Alatus's skin. Instantly, the hot burning sensation faded, the skin smoothed over like new, and Alatus breathed in relief. "This is gushing oil. It will help you to heal faster. It should also help to replenish your Anemo energy. You made me do this to you; the least I can do is make it better now." He spread the oil into his hands, being especially gentle over the blistered areas. He rolled the singed cloth of Alatus's pants higher onto his legs before dripping oil there, and Alatus was too relieved to protest.

"Thank you." He exhaled.

"As I was *saying*..." Zhui continued. "That human definitely went back to his people and told them all about how he saw a divine being, one with teal hair and green markings on his arm, that killed his two friends with a spear and then came after him, too." He smiled audibly, a soft wet smacking sound as his lips peeled apart. "Do you think that when Liyue hears that the Great Anemo Yaksha is out and about, running rampant and killing humans, that they will be in any hurry to save you?"

Alatus's blood went cold.

"You think that the other yaksha will still want to hear from you?" Zhui moved around the block towards Alatus's head. "You think they will still be your 'family' after that?"

"They love me." Alatus's voice was uncertain. "This is not my fault. It wasn't my fault."

Zhui put both hands on the sides of Alatus's face, grinning at him from upside down. "Oh, but it was your fault. You killed those humans. And if you would have just listened to me, and killed all of them, then you wouldn't be in this position in the first place. Do they really want you, a human killer that can't follow instructions, holding them back from their ideals?" He tapped the gushing oil into Alatus's neck. "Didn't the electro yaksha say at one point that your power scared them?"

What was his name... Bo...?"

"Bosacius." Alatus's lips barely formed the name.

"Yes, sure, whatever," Zhui said impatiently. "My point is, no one else wants you. No one else *will* want you. No one will look for you. You only have me now." He smiled, replacing the cap on the jar and reaching to push Alatus's hair out of his eyes.

"*Don't touch me.*" Alatus bolted upright, catching Zhui's wrist in his hand and shoving him away, as hard as he could. His mind raced. It wasn't his fault. *It wasn't his fault.* He hadn't asked for this. He hadn't had a *choice*. He had to kill those humans in order to survive, he couldn't have taken another burn, couldn't have taken another breath...

But he could have just let Zhui kill him. He could have died. And then he would be free.

Zhui stumbled backwards, irritation flashing across his face. He stretched his hand out towards the walls.

"No — not again — *please!*" Alatus realized too late what was happening. The iron chains flung themselves out from the walls, crushing around his wrists and ankles, anchoring him upright in the middle of the room. "Haaaa..." He breathed hard, resisting the pressure pulling his shoulders apart.

"I want you to think about this, Alatus." Zhui spat his name, twisting the vowels in his teeth. "You're just a tool now, and don't you dare forget it. You are *nothing* apart from me."

The words bounced off the blackstone walls, but they echoed louder in Alatus's mind.

Chapter End Notes

Research notes: idk when the treasure hoarders became a thing, but given the name of the founder im pretty sure it was much later than ancient liyue; im just assuming they had ninjas back then. Its also very hard to kill treasure hoarders until one finally dies // they usually just smoke bomb away // I AM RAMBLING BECAUSE I AM HAVING A BAD! TIME! I FEEL SO UNSAFE??? THIS IS MY OWN WRITING oh boy.

I hope you're all okay <3 it really will get worse before it gets better. thank you for reading!

Chained Down by the Voices

Chapter Summary

“Have you ever tried meditating?”

“Meditating? No..?” What did meditating have to do with anything?

The god waved his hand. “Meditation is when you try and think deeply, or focus deeply, on one thing. Or on nothing. It really depends on who you ask,” he mused. “The other worlds have their own version of meditation as well. I think the Buddhists try to think of nothing. But the others try to think of something. And then those crunchy granola people try to think of... Leafy green vegetables that they can drink.”

Alatus blinked at him. He must have completely lost his mind.

“I’m joking!” Zhui took a seat in front of Alatus. “People use meditation for a variety of reasons. Some people believe it can help them heal faster, or get to Celestia, or receive a Vision. As if sitting and thinking hard will get the Seven to notice you and give you a Vision.” He rolled his eyes. “No. I want you to use meditation to get you to wear your mask for longer.”

Chapter Notes

Tw: more panic attack symptoms // Okay so let’s make it better please for the love of God at least a tiny tiny bit :’D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was hard to tell time in the room. The pyres would burn for about eight hours, and then the crackling sounds and the flickering light would stop. And then it was just Alatus in the dark. Time passed slower without any stimulation, but Alatus refused to let his mind travel.

The biggest part of his mind stayed focused on pulling on his chains. Every blast of Anemo energy through the material, which Alatus was almost positive wasn’t actually iron, did nothing but apply more force through the incessant jangling. His shoulders stung from the stretch of his still-healing skin, and the cuffs dug into his wrists until the skin was raw. The angle of the chain forced his hands in an awkward bent position, and the muscle ached to move.

But it was fine! If he felt his mind start to think about home, think about his family, thinking about food or the sky or singing, he rattled the chains harder until he bled.

He thought about his discomfort. It was easier than thinking about anything else.

It took Zhui less time to come back than it had the first time he’d gone. He immediately wrinkled his nose upon seeing Alatus covered in rivers of blood that had trickled down his arms. “Archons. What did you do to yourself?” He reached his hand out. The chains slackened, just enough that

Alatus could collapse onto his knees on the floor, but not enough that he could bend his elbows more than a few centimeters.

Alatus didn't answer. He stretched his wrists backwards, as far as they could reach, exhaling with relief.

"I brought this for you." Zhui moved closer, and Alatus distantly registered that he was still wearing his hanfu instead of armor and holding a glass bowl.

"Don't want it." These were the first words Alatus had spoken in so long. His voice rasped painfully in his ragged throat.

Zhui rolled his eyes. "Don't be a child." He lowered himself down to Alatus's eye level, grabbed his jaw roughly, and jammed a spoon into his mouth.

Alatus recoiled, ready to spit — but then the flavor of berries covered his tongue and crisp ice crushed against his teeth, soothing his throat as he reflexively swallowed. The tatters of flesh seemed to heal over, and he cautiously opened his mouth for another bite.

"That's what I thought," Zhui tutted. "I don't know why you don't just let yourself trust me."

As much as Alatus hated being alone, he hated being fed like a child by the person he'd dubbed his mortal enemy even more. "What is it?" He muttered, accepting another infuriatingly indulgent spoonful.

"Gushing oil on snow." He scraped the sides of the glass bowl, making pleasant tinkling sounds.

"Snow is food?" Alatus swallowed the next bite, feeling more refreshed and energized than he ever had before. "There's so little of it in Liyue. Where did you even get it?"

Zhui laughed at him, and Alatus mentally cursed himself for letting his curiosity take over again. "You're not the only person I interact with, Alatus. I go places. I know people." He tipped the last spoonful of snow between Alatus's lips.

Alatus crossed and uncrossed his legs, trying to work feeling back into them. The chains around his ankles clanked. He was getting really tired of that sound. "So why are you here, if you're not going to take these off today?"

Zhui arched one eyebrow and smiled. Crookedly. "I like to see you, Alatus. You're especially beautiful in chains." He laughed again when Alatus groaned in disgust. "Have you ever tried meditating?"

"Meditating? No..?" What did meditating have to do with anything?

The god waved his hand, and the empty bowl vanished. "Meditation is when you try and think deeply, or focus deeply, on one thing. Or on nothing. It really depends on who you ask," he mused. "The other worlds have their own version of meditation as well. I think the Buddhists try to think of nothing. But the others try to think of something. And then those crunchy granola people try to think of... Leafy green vegetables that they can drink."

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eyes. “No. I want you to use meditation to get you to wear your mask for longer.”

Alatus’s heart sped up. “You’re giving me back my mask?”

“Sure.” Zhui waved his hand noncommitedly. “I don’t think that even with the mask, you could break those chains. They took eons to make. But maybe you could, given time; that’s why I want you to try wearing it for longer.”

Alatus had been so distracted by the idea of getting his mask back that he hadn’t fully comprehended what Zhui had said. “Wait. I haven’t worn it for longer than five seconds at a time.”

“I know,” Zhui replied simply.

“It speaks, inside my head. I’m not used to it.”

“I know.”

“I only ever use it for the jumping and plunge attack.”

“I know.”

Desperation started to surge in Alatus’s veins. His skin jumped, rattling the chains. “It drains my life energy, it literally drains my life, I’ve felt it before, it’s painful the whole way through, it whispers...”

“I know!” Zhui silenced him with a look. “Of course I would not make you keep it on long enough to die. I did not do all that research and preparation for you to die after such a short amount of time with me. Don’t be ridiculous.” He summoned the mask with a snap. “Let’s just test it out, why don’t we?” He reached out without preamble and placed the mask on Alatus’s face.

The cool weight of the mask was familiar, almost reassuringly so, but the whispers were louder than they had ever been. Anemo energy rushed into Alatus’s limbs, filling him with power that shook the chains all the way up to their roots in the walls. He instinctively tried to wish it away, to dematerialize it the same way he did his spear, but he couldn’t think over the whispers, couldn’t remember how to do it, as if the mask was insistent on forcing him to feel all of the pain of his previous victims as well as giving him the destructive power to do more damage. He sucked in a sharp breath when all of the strength that went into pulling just caused more hell on his wrists.

Worthless useless inferior trash pathetic miserable wretch hate you hate you hate you

He threw his head back, closing his eyes tightly shut, trying to block out the voices, but there was nowhere to channel the energy. The whispers grew louder, building a pounding rhythm in his head, and his ears started ringing.

WorthlessuselessinferiortrashhateyouhateyouhateyouhateyouHATEYOUHATEYOUHATEYOU

His heart was a vibrating gong. He couldn’t distinguish each individual beat over the thrum.

HATEHATEHATEHATEHATEHATEHATEHATE

Curls of greenish black smoke started to waft off of his skin. He could feel his flesh starting to thin, as if his soul was stretching out in an attempt to keep his body united. Alatus dropped his head forward, grinding his teeth together so hard he could feel his jawbones popping, hissing from the exertion of clenching every voluntary muscle. “Hnng...” His torso contorted.

He gasped as the mask was torn away from his face. The smoke dissipated, and his body was suddenly heavy as his cells reunited. The ringing in his ears was still present, and he looked down, abruptly aware that he was hyperventilating. Breathe, he reminded himself. In. Out. He opened his eyes and realized he was crying.

Zhui hadn't moved from his position on the floor. "I didn't think about the ensuing karma that would come from all the hilichurls you killed the other day," he murmured. "I forgot about the humans, too... Their voices must be much louder. You're recovering well." He reached out to push a lock of Alatus's hair behind his ear.

Alatus tried to pull away. In. Out. Zhui's hands were cold. In and out. Don't touch me. In out in out in out.

"I noticed when we first met that you focus on your breathing when you panic," Zhui commented. His voice was quiet.

Alatus swallowed hard. Inhale in. Exhale out. "That's a nice way of saying you abducted me from my family."

"Right." Zhui continued, unfazed. "I didn't know you did that. That's why for my first command to you, I made you breathe."

"That didn't really help with it. If anything, it just made me panic more." Alatus blinked rapidly. The corners of his eyes itched from his drying tears, but he could feel his heart very slowly returning to its normal pulse.

"I'm sorry," Zhui said softly. "I thought I was helping." He was silent for another moment, waiting until Alatus's shaky breaths steadied completely. "How was the power, though? Did you get stronger the longer it stayed on? Was that the first time that you started coming apart like that?"

Alatus glared at Zhui through his eyelashes.

The archon smiled and cocked his head. "In some cases, meditation can allow you to be more in touch with other people's brain waves. For gods that receive prayers, they can hear the desires of the people that worship them. For me, it means that I can tell what you're thinking, Alatus."

"..."

"You're thinking about how much you hate me."

"Yes."

"Hm." Zhui folded his arms thoughtfully. "Why don't you try this. Tell me about your happy place. Give me a list of the things that you like."

Alatus scoffed in surprise and shook his head, clearing the last ghosts of the voices from his mind. "Why?"

"It is a part of the meditation process. Do not question me." There was just enough danger in Zhui's voice that Alatus flinched.

"I..." He still hesitated. It was hard to think about happy things; it just made returning to reality that much harder.

“Alatus.”

It was terrible to hear his name spoken in such a way.

“I like my family.” He started. “I like swimming. I like singing, and dancing.” *I like conversations with Indarias. I like hearing stories with Bonanus.* “I really like sweet food, but spicy food is good too.” *I like sparring with Menogias. I like going on adventures with Bosacius.* “I love flowers... Water lilies, and Qingxin, and even sweet flowers.” *Are they thinking of me right now?* “Bonanus told me there are these white flowers that are special to Mondstadt, and I want to see one someday. Cecilia, they’re called...” His heart twisted. He might never get to see one.

He shook his head. *Don’t think about that.*

Zhui’s expression was calm. “So meditate on those things. Think about the way that they make you feel and hone in on that emotion. Try to make it so you forget everything except that happiness.”

Alatus closed his eyes again. He imagined the sun and the wind. He imagined the cold, blood-sticky weight of the iron cuffs was gone. He imagined a plate of sweet lotus crisps and mooncakes. He imagined Zhui’s head on a stick. He imagined his fellow yaksha, beaming at him, teaching him everything they knew and telling him he was loved. He could almost smell the fresh, unsoured air at the peaks of Jueyan Karst...

He jerked in his chains again as Zhui pushed the mask back onto his face. “Gah, no! *Shit!*” He cursed for the first time in his life. The energy seized his body, and he didn’t even notice when fresh blood started running down his arms again.

Worthless useless inferior trash...

He could feel it this time when the tears stung his eyes and his breath caught in his throat. Worthless useless inferior trash... He couldn’t do anything right. He couldn’t handle this much power. There was nowhere for the energy to go, he couldn’t keep up, couldn’t take it, couldn’t breathe —

“Imagine a sea of flowers.” Zhui said, somewhere very far away. Alatus clung on to his voice rising above the whispers. “Cecilia grows in Mondstadt, only where the wind blows the harshest. It’s not like its counterpart, the Windwheel Aster, which only grows where the wind is gentle; but the Windwheel Aster is red, anyway, and I have a feeling you like white flowers.”

He did like white flowers.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

“Cecilia looks a lot like a water lily with only one layer of petals,” Zhui continued. “The petals are longer, too. It’s a beautiful flower. I imagine you would like it.” He paused. His next words were sharp. “Why are your eyes closed? Open your eyes.”

Alatus opened his eyes, forcing himself to keep his breaths even — but smoke was curling off his skin again, and the panic instantly kicked back in. His head jerked from side to side. The chains jangled extra loud in his ears, which were already reverberating with his heartbeat. “I can’t do it. I can’t do it, I can’t do it, *I’m dying,*” Alatus gasped, Anemo energy shooting in a straight shot of pain through his sternum.

“Accept it.” Zhui commanded. “It has already been longer than before. You have to learn how to maintain calm even with your eyes open. You were doing so well! Don’t mess it up now!”

HATEYOUHATEYOUHATEYOUHATEYOU

His vision was hazy with tears. Alatus's body contorted again and he whimpered in pain.

Zhui sighed, like he was disappointed. "Oh, fine." He removed the mask. "We were having such a pleasant day. I don't know why you felt the need to ruin it."

Alatus exhaled. It was a pleasant surprise to find that his breaths sounded less strangled, although the tears continued rolling down the sides of his face.

"You are supposed to be good at everything. It's sad that your mental resilience is so low. You can do better than that, Alatus. I know you can." Zhui turned his hand over, and the chains pulled Alatus upright until he was standing again.

The yaksha grimaced, trying to maneuver his head onto his shoulder to wipe his eyes on his soft green sleeve. Inhale. Exhale. His heart was still pounding. "Maybe *you* should try it, then," he muttered defensively under his breath.

Zhui's hand was instantly up against Alatus's windpipe, crushing the air out of him with a gurgling sound. He was smiling. Dangerous. "Don't you mean, 'thank you, master, for teaching and taking care of me today?'"

Bile rose and burned Alatus's throat and nose and eyes. "Thank you, master, for — *khhkh* — for teaching and taking care of me today." He coughed when Zhui released him, eyes stinging with fresh tears. Bruises ached and blossomed under his skin.

"Hm." Zhui narrowed his eyes. "You're welcome." He turned to leave. He didn't bother to relight the pyres in the room. The blackstone doors closed, and Alatus was once again alone in the dark.

At least the whispers were gone.

He closed his eyes to block out the dim red glow. Breathe in. Breathe out. He thought about flowers. He thought about water. In. Out.

He hummed softly, just loud enough not to echo.

*"When the darkness comes,
Just know that I'll be here,
Always watching you,
I will be right here."*

But when he opened his eyes again, he was still alone.

Chapter End Notes

I hope this gave you a break lol (oh and we are back next chapter with the even more terrible shit :) // good night everyone

Link to the song is in the third chapter! I recently discovered that Winding River is technically Ganyu's song, but work with me here

Dreams Are Sweet

Chapter Summary

“Humans. How odd that their dreams can be so sweet when their every intention is so repulsive.” Zhui looked at Alatus again. “It will not be painful, and the human will not die. It will be good for you.”

“No!” The sticky ocean air and grains of sand clung to Alatus’s skin and clothes. He didn’t bother to brush them off as he stood. “This crosses a line. She hasn’t done anything!”

“All humans are sinners. Even if it hasn’t done anything now, which it definitely has, it eventually will. Eat its dreams.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Weeks passed through inhales and exhales.

Sometimes Zhui would come. Sometimes he would take Alatus to go kill hilichurls. Sometimes he would just come and encourage him to meditate. He did not force Alatus to wear the mask again; he only made him meditate and fight. Sometimes Alatus killed whopperflowers or slimes. One time Zhui summoned a Pyro Regisvine and forced him to fight it, giving him snow to refresh him. Sometimes Alatus meditated by himself, just to pass the time — but no matter what he did, he ended up back in chains by the end of each day, trying to deal with the discomfort until the next time he could move again. He had learned fairly quickly that testing the restraints only caused more pain.

He was numb to the point of boredom until the day the archon brought him to a beach.

Alatus had not left Minlin for the majority of his years, except for one time when Menogias brought him to southern Liyue to see the Sea of Clouds, so he was unfamiliar with the rest of the land in Liyue. He turned slowly. The sky was dark gray and cloudy, with no moon or stars to illuminate the night. He could see the foggy outlines of cliffs around him, with one particularly close rock towering high; beyond that, there was a massive mountain, taller than even Qinyun Peak. The little bit of light in the sky came from the clouds capping this mountain, glowing blue and cold. Alatus marveled, and his natural gentle curiosity took over. “Where is this place?”

Zhui was humming a pointless tune like a child, watching the water and rocking on his heels. “This is Yaoguang Shoal. Not that you know where that is. And that —” he pointed at the cloud-capped mountain — “that is Dragonspine. It is technically a part of Mondstadt, but no one from Mondstadt or Liyue ever goes there.”

“Why?” The colorful clouds were mesmerizing. Alatus wanted to touch them.

“Too cold. Adventurers often die from the sheer cold.” Zhui stated matter-of-factly, as if he were commenting on daily weather. He turned towards Alatus, not giving the yaksha a moment to process what he’d said. “Today I want to teach you something that your yaksha family never would

have.” He smiled.

Alatus pushed down his feeling of unease. Just like with the chains, he had learned that it was easier not to resist when Zhui tested him. He didn’t know where he was, anyway; even if he could run, which wasn’t worth the punishment, he probably couldn’t get very far. He looked out longingly at the water. What was on the other side?

“Pay attention when I talk to you, Alatus,” Zhui insisted, and Alatus turned back away from the shore. “I am going to teach you a ritual that anyone can do. All the meditation I have had you do was not for nothing. Of course I want you to be able to use your mask to its full potential, but it is also a necessary part of the Dream Trawler.”

“Dream Trawler?” The words were unfamiliar.

Zhui put a hand to his chestplate, right over where his heart would be. “It has several purposes, but generally it is a ritual used to separate the soul from the body for any one reason.”

Dream Trawler. “What is a dream?” Alatus asked. Dream. Dream Trawler. The name sounded sweet.

“Oh. Right.” Zhui rolled his eyes. “I forgot that your family didn’t allow you to experience sleep until this recently. I cannot believe that you have never even been knocked out.”

He said this as if he had not been the first living thing to make Alatus lose consciousness by force.

“A dream, in its fundamental definition, is just thoughts or images that one experiences in sleep.” Zhui waved his hand, procuring a censer and a joss stick. “For humans, dreams in their definition are a result of brain chemistry. But it is also more than that. Their dreams are their ideals, and aspirations, and everything that they want. Apart from their dreams, and their devotion to their archons, humans do not have much other will to stay alive.” He touched the tip of the incense, and the sweet fragrance warmed the cool night air. “I actually do not know if yaksha can dream. The next time you fall asleep, Alatus, you should tell me.” Zhui smiled, and Alatus cringed inwardly.

I will never fall asleep again.

Zhui was humming again, diligently setting lamps in a circle around the censer. “When you wear the mask, you can hear and feel the hate of everything you have ever killed. They draw out the worst in you, get a rise out of you, and make you want to destroy everything around you, even to the detriment of your own life force. That is the karma that yaksha must face when they don the mask.”

Alatus crouched, holding his knees against his chest and putting one hand down to feel the sand. The grains on his palm were grounding. “What does that have to do with dreams?”

“Patience, Alatus. We’ll get to that.” Zhui stepped back, admiring his work, lighting the lamps with a few well-placed bolts of elemental energy. “It should be cold enough, being this close to Dragonspine at night,” he murmured softly. “All right. I am ready.” He sat on the sand in front of the censer. “Now we meditate.” He closed his eyes and clasped his hands together.

Meditate on what? Alatus rocked on the sand, enjoying the yield of the land beneath his feet. It was nice to have a moment of freedom without the restraints of Zhui’s watchful eyes.

He was completely unprepared when the ghostly shade of a young Liyuen woman appeared suddenly before him.

Alatus fell backwards, eyes wide open in shock. “What— who is that?”

The Liyuen woman was just as shocked as he was. “Oh my archons.” Her head darted in all directions, taking in her surroundings. “Where am I? What is happening?” She turned and saw Alatus and Zhui, still flat on the sand. “Are you adepti? Please help me!”

Zhui’s expression was neutral. “Alatus, if you put your hand on a human’s forehead and think about taking its life force, you can actually consume its dreams. Try it now.”

“What?” The woman and Alatus gasped in unison.

The archon huffed. “Why do you insist on questioning me?”

“I won’t do it.” Alatus stared at the woman, silently begging her to run away.

She spun wildly, black hair flying, panic settling more in her eyes. “Is this a dream?” She threw herself at Zhui’s feet, bowing her head to the ground. “My lord, have mercy on me!”

Zhui stood, clearly disgusted. “Humans. How odd that their dreams can be so sweet when their every intention is so repulsive.” He looked at Alatus again. “It will not be painful, and the human will not die. It will be good for you.”

“No!” The sticky ocean air and grains of sand clung to Alatus’s skin and clothes. He didn’t bother to brush them off as he stood. “This crosses a line. She hasn’t done anything!”

“All humans are sinners. Even if it hasn’t done anything now, which it definitely has, it eventually will. Eat its dreams.”

The woman was sobbing at this point, shaking from fear and cold. Her spirit was strong; Alatus could tell that she was healthy and could live a potentially long life. The outlines of her blue shade were clear, even against the sand that was gray in the night. “Please,” she was praying, “Rex Lapis, save me...”

“Hm.” Zhui sighed, exasperated. “Well, now you’ve gone and done it, you stupid human. You had to ruin a perfectly good Dream Trawler.” He shook his head. “Alatus, you still have not learned to obey me. Fine. I will find another way to show you that I know best.”

The sky rumbled, far, far away, but Zhui looked up, and just a hint of nervousness crossed his face. “Close your eyes,” he commanded.

Alatus was familiar enough with this command to know that when he opened them again, he would be back at the blackstone castle.

◇ ◇ ◇

Alatus hated the darkness. He had tried to pry his own eyes open before, only to stop when he felt his eyelashes tearing from the lids. He knew that if he could see, just once, *how* exactly Zhui transported him to and from the godforsaken wasteland surrounding the castle, he would be able to replicate it exactly.

But Zhui knew it too, and he was always careful to keep Alatus in the dark as much as possible.

This time, though, he was not alone.

“I don’t know how much you know about humans, Alatus, but you should know this much at

least.” Zhui moved to light the pyres in the room before throwing the shade of the woman roughly against the blackstone floor. Alatus instinctively moved to help her up, but was stopped with a glare from the archon. “Humans need to maintain their bodies to survive. They need to eat, to drink, to sleep, to stretch, to stimulate their stupid little minds a little bit.” He summoned one of Alatus’s chains from the floor.

Alatus flinched, but Zhui did not approach him with it, instead wrapping it around the woman’s ankle. She sobbed again, crying softly, “no, no, no...”

“Oh, for archons’ sake.” Zhui snapped impatiently, summoning a band of iron that wedged between the shade’s teeth, interrupting the tracks of tears on her face and the words in her mouth. “I cannot *stand* humans, and their *pleading*. As if all the forgiveness and mercy ever changes anything! They sin, and they sin, and their karma builds and builds, and we forgive and forgive, and yet they *still* turn out like this.” He kicked at the human, wrinkling his nose when she made a muffled sound of pain. “I can sense your karma, *human*. I feel no pity for you.”

Alatus, unable to hold back anymore, darted to place himself between the human and the archon. His hands trembled. “Why are you doing this? What is the purpose?” He tried not to plead, but he could hear the desperation in his own voice.

Zhui’s face was stone. “If its spirit does not return to the body, it will not wake up. Its body will burn in the day, freeze in the night, dehydrate, starve, and atrophy from the lack of movement. The spirit will feel the pain, experience the loss, and reflect the state of the body itself. Soon, Alatus, you will see how truly disgusting a human is.” He straightened, looking disdainfully down past the yaksha at the human as he walked towards the blackstone doors. “I can’t believe I really allowed one into my own space.”

The woman’s entire body was shaking. The doors slammed behind Zhui’s retreating figure, and Alatus reached out to touch her shoulder. “Don’t be afraid of me. I won’t listen to him,” he said as firmly as he could. “I won’t hurt you.”

She removed the piece of iron from her mouth and threw it aside. It bounced against the blackstone, not making even a dent, and Alatus winced at the clanging sound. “Who was that?” Her voice was small. “Please. I have a daughter at home. She’s so little, she can’t take care of herself, I need to go home. She can’t find me in a coma. Please.”

“I don’t know how to release your spirit.” Alatus’s hand clenched into a fist. “But I promise, I will do my best to make sure you return to your daughter. Where’s her father?”

She tensed. “I don’t know where her father is.”

Alatus frowned. “You don’t know where he is? What kind of man would leave his wife and daughter to fend for themselves? The Qixing could not possibly allow that to slide. What have they done to aid you?”

“Let me rephrase that.” The woman closed her eyes and took a shallow breath. “I don’t know *who* her father is.”

“You don’t... oh.” Alatus sat back on his heels.

“This is my worst nightmare,” the woman murmured, closing her eyes and resting her head on the wall. “This is my karma for everything I have ever done. This is how I will pay for those I have hurt.”

“No!” Alatus shook his head fiercely. “I won’t let you die. What is your name?”

“Lianming.”

“Lianming.” The name meant grace. “My name...” He hesitated for a moment before going on.

“My name is Alatus. I am a yaksha. And I will not do anything to hurt you. I swear on the name of Rex Lapis.”

She smiled wanly, but at least she smiled. “Thank you, Alatus.”

It was a blessing to hear his name in someone else’s voice.

◇ ◇ ◇

As the days passed, it became increasingly more apparent that Lianming was not going to be okay.

Her skin burned with dry heat when Alatus touched her forehead, and her lips and tongue were cracked as if she’d been subject to Zhui’s pyro energy. She hadn’t been able to stand by the first couple of days, and she smelled strongly of metallic ketones and dehydrated urine. Alatus had done all he could to draw moisture from the air, but there was only so much he could accomplish for a shade.

“Alatus,” she mumbled, voice thick around her tongue. “Water, I need water...”

The nail marks in Alatus’s palms were long since permanent fixtures. “I know... I’m sorry...”

By the time Zhui returned, she was almost completely delirious, on fire with fever. The stench had increased, and the archon entered the room holding his nose shut. “Archons,” he honked. “That’s terrible. The human did that? She doesn’t even have a body. How did she do that?”

Alatus’s knees were stiff against the stone floor. He wouldn’t look away from Lianming. “*You* did this. Why can’t you let her go?”

Lianming twitched in her semiconscious state. “Meimei...” she groaned. “Make it stop.”

The corners of Zhui’s mouth tilted, and he released his nose. “Perhaps I did this, Alatus, but you can make it stop.”

“No. I won’t do it.” Alatus turned Lianming’s head, tilting her gently off the floor. The stone was warm where she’d made contact with it.

“I think you sho-uld,” Zhui singsonged. “The human is going to die if you don’t. Do you realize that?” He took a step forward before wrinkling his nose and stepping back. “Why are you attached to it, anyway? It doesn’t mean anything to you. Its life means nothing to you. You’ve killed humans before; why is this one any different?”

“She’s not an *it*.” Alatus refused to look at the archon. He gritted his teeth. “Give her water. Please.”

Zhui shook his head. The beads in his hair clicked together. “It’s definitely too late for that. You should put *her* out of *her* misery.” He shuffled innocently. “*She*’s done nothing for you. But look. Even if you eat *her* dreams now, you will be doing *her* a favor.” Zhui smiled, fully aware that every pronoun was another taunt.

“I won’t do it!” Alatus shouted. “I won’t!”

Zhui's grin was infuriating. "Why don't you ask her what she wants, then?"

Alatus opened his mouth to protest again — but stopped when he felt a hot, feverish hand on his arm.

"Please." Lianming rasped. "*Please do it.*"

Alatus's head swam. "You made it this long, Lianming, I can't! I can't do this to you, I promised!" He gripped her hand in his. "I promised I wouldn't hurt you!"

She coughed. It was a pathetic, scratching sound. She looked up at the yaksha, and her eyes were glassy, dry, breaking apart in their sockets. The hair on her physical head must have been matting more and more with each passing day, reflecting the tangled mess on the head of her shade.

"Alatus." The name scraped her throat. "I can feel rats running across my body. There is nothing left for me. Please, please make it stop." She gripped his arm tightly, nails digging into his skin. "*Let me out.*"

Alatus hesitated for one more moment. It was the most that she had said to him since she arrived. He couldn't imagine the pain she was in. No matter how much discomfort he felt daily, it must have been infinitely worse to be human. "You don't deserve this," he said softly. "I'm sorry. I will never not be sorry."

Her pleading eyes finally closed.

He reached out. He put his palm against her burning forehead. He thought about killing her. He pictured himself piercing her heart with his spear.

He imagined how free she could finally feel.

Lianming gasped. A shining blue wisp of energy curled off of her head.

Alatus instinctively reached out for it, guiding it towards his lips. He squeezed his eyes shut tight, bracing himself for the worst...

The texture was *heavenly*.

Silk danced across Alatus's tongue, slipping smoothly down his throat, coating his taste buds with the light flavor of happiness and excitement.

All sorts of dreams filled him with life.

Anticipation.

Hope for the future.

The idea that things in the future would be good; that Meimei could be happy and rich one day, that she would marry a man that loved her and have beautiful children; that they could visit other villages together, and maybe someday travel to Mondstadt, or even Fontaine.

Sweetness.

Light.

Joy untainted by the dark past.

Alatus's eyelids fluttered with pleasure at the sensation, turning the silky dream over and over in

his mouth.

“Good, isn’t it?” Zhui said, so close and so sudden that Alatus jumped. The archon was leaning over Lianming’s slowly fading shade, examining her with a disrespectful indifference. “With this Dream Trawling, you take back a little bit of humanity. Isn’t it funny? Through such an inhuman process, you get to feel a little more human.”

Alatus’s hand was still on Lianming’s. He stroked it as soothingly as he could while her form shimmered. Her eyes were closed. Her breathing was still shallow, but seemed to come more easily. “Will it actually help with the karmic debt I have?”

“I wish I knew.” Zhui shrugged. “But do you feel better?”

Alatus flexed his fingers. He felt more awake than he had before, and just a little more invincible, like he was glowing from the inside out. His anxiety felt pressed down, replaced by something like expectation.

His eye twitched when he spoke. “Yes.”

Zhui made a small sound of satisfaction. “Your yaksha family never would have taught you that. Imagine never experiencing eating a dream. Would you like more?” He grinned, still looming over Alatus and Lianming.

Yes. I want more. I want to eat dreams. Give me more. “No.”

“I’m sure you’ll change your mind.” In one smooth motion, Zhui drew his red sword and pointed it at Lianming’s shade. “Goodbye, human!”

“Wha— no, *wait!*” Alatus lunged forward, but he was too late to stop the blast of Pyro energy that shot out from Zhui’s sword.

Lianming’s shade did not make a sound; she seemed to accept the flames, exhaling what must have been a sigh of relief as the last of her light faded away.

“Why did you do that?” Alatus cried, hands still uselessly grasping at the air in front of him. “I did what you told me to! I ate her dreams, I broke a promise, you didn’t have to do this!” He crushed his palms against his temples. “Why, why, *why?!?*”

Zhui straightened and dematerialized his sword with a sweep of his hand. “I told you this on the beach that day. To humans, dreams are ideals, aspirations, and everything that they want. Without their dreams, they have no motivation to stay alive. If she went back to her body, she still would not have survived for much longer, since she had no hope for the future and no care for her family. I did a favor. I gave her the merciful way out.” He shrugged. “Learn this now and remember it, Alatus. Death is the easy way out. Staying alive, being true to your word, being true to your *contracts*, is much, much harder.”

Alatus slumped forward, pressing his fists into the floor. When Zhui chained him and left him again in the darkness, he barely noticed.

He had made a promise, and in the end, all he did was prolong her suffering for longer. In the end, Zhui still had to come and show him again how little he knew.

It was his fault.

It was always his fault.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading~

The next chapter will be more fun, I promise! The end of this is in sight.

Soooooooooooooooooon.

Soon.

All You Are is a Weapon

Chapter Summary

Zhui smirked. “When you get yourself together, we have a big event today. I think that it is high time you came with me to meet some of my...” He cocked his head. “Ah, let’s call them workplace acquaintances. I have been invited to a meeting, and for the sake of my own safety, I am going to bring you along.” He clapped once, startling Alatus with the sound. “I really hope they have some good food. Maybe some bamboo-shoot soup. Ooh, or maybe some *slow-cooked* bamboo-shoot soup.”

Deep breaths. In. Out. He was going to leave the castle for a reason other than mindless slaughter. Alatus stood, adjusting his knees to the balance. “Are you not able to have good food here?”

“Pffft.” Zhui huffed. “You think being an archon is synonymous with being rich and famous and loved? We can’t all be Morax, you know. We can’t all have infinite Mora and all kinds of food at our beck and call. Imagine that.”

Alatus couldn’t imagine. He hadn’t eaten anything other than snow and dreams in ages.

Chapter Notes

Early chapter for everyone in honor of our favorite boi's birthday :D Happy 2000+ years, Xiao!

TW: blood/gore

Archon War research: Barbatos (Venti) took over as Anemo archon of Mondstadt and one of the Seven of Teyvat by dethroning his predecessor, Decarabian. He coexists with Boreas (aka Andrius, the Wolf), but Andrius does not actually rule land in Mondstadt. Of course, we know that Venti values freedom, so Mondstadt is a happy place under him :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Alatus had always been a quick learner. He was quick to learn that the less he chose to feel, the less painful the rest of his life would be. He had accepted that this would be the rest of his life.

He accepted the iron chains every night. He accepted the black tassel spear. He accepted the black changpao that Zhui gave him to replace his singed green one. He accepted his teal hair, which had grown long enough over the decades to fall all the way to his waist. And he had begun to accept the fact that he was completely, absolutely, entirely addicted to dreams.

Slaughter was mindless. Dream eating was second nature. Even the dreams of the hilichurls, which often made no sense, were sweet, smooth, and made Alatus feel alive.

Zhui was a petty master with a disdain for humans. Crossing him, even a little, was punishable by death, and it always fell to Alatus to carry out this sentence. He never failed to fulfill these orders, and as a result, there was never any shortage of dreams.

It was the only way he could handle the facts of what he was doing.

I follow orders because I have to; I eat dreams because I cannot cope with following orders; I feel the weight of the guilt and karmic debt from eating dreams; therefore, I eat more dreams.

What a vicious cycle.

Making the distinction between his own actions and the forced commands of his master was getting more and more difficult. Alatus often came away from fights in a bloody daze, unable to remember if Zhui had given him a command or if he had gone headfirst into battle himself. There was a distant fear of punishment, a fear of burning — and even though Zhui had not physically tortured him in a long time, Alatus moved with the expectation that failure to obey would result in pain.

At some point, though, he started moving with the expectation that he could have more dreams.

He shook his head, yanking on his chains. The iron dug into his raw wrist, the pain a cleansing reminder of where he was.

Zhui's presence was a comforting distraction.

"I rather like your hair like this," the archon commented when he next returned. "You look older than when I met you. You look more like me." He reached out to admire a lock of it, turning the blue-green strands in his fingers before releasing Alatus from his chains. "It's a beautiful color."

Alatus shivered but did not pull away. He rubbed his palms together, feeling his joints warm up again as he moved. His scalp tingled where Zhui held his hair.

Zhui smirked, twirling the strand once before letting it slip back into place. "When you get yourself together, we have a big event today. I think that it is high time you came with me to meet some of my..." He cocked his head. "Ah, let's call them workplace acquaintances. I have been invited to a meeting, and for the sake of my own safety, I am going to bring you along." He clapped once, startling Alatus with the sound. "I really hope they have some good food. Maybe some bamboo-shoot soup. Ooh, or maybe some *slow-cooked* bamboo-shoot soup."

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Alatus couldn't imagine. He hadn't eaten anything other than snow and dreams in ages.

The sun was setting when they left the castle, streaking the sky in purple and gold. Alatus paused to adjust to the light and drink in the magical colors, smiling a little at the magnificence. The air was clean and cool, the breeze gentle against his skin.

"Now!" Zhui matter-of-factly said, summoning Alatus's mask and tapping it. "I need to make this order as specific as possible. Let's see... Don't talk to anyone about who you are, what your name is, or how you came to work for me. Don't communicate to them in any way to try to get away

from me. If they talk to you, respond in three words or less.” He reached out and tilted Alatus’s face towards him with the tip of his nail guard. “Not that you want to get away from me anyway, right, Alatus?”

“No...” Alatus’s jaw locked as he clenched his teeth.

“No one else can take care of you like I can, right?” The archon’s voice was casual and quiet.

“Yes...” Alatus stared at the ground. The rocks were gold in the twilight.

“Good!” Zhui smiled. “You know the drill, then. Close your eyes, and let’s be off.”

◇ ◇ ◇

When Alatus next opened his eyes, he was in Western Liyue. He could see Dragonspine highlighted against the sunset-purple clouds. The castle opposite it was taller than Zhui’s, simple gray stone that loomed stories high without expanding outwards. It didn’t quite qualify as a castle; it was more like a tower.

It was Alatus’s first time using stairs. He didn’t think it was much better than climbing a hill or a mountain.

At the top of the stairs was a room with a long white quartz table, at which was seated five archons. “Ah,” he heard Zhui mutter. “No food.”

The other archons were unassuming. At first glance, none of them quite held the same kind of weight that Zhui did. They were all shorter than he was, and none of them had prepared the kind of defensive armor that Zhui had. There was a relatively young archon with a chestplate on backwards and his boots up on the table that had a nervous bodyguard on his right, and a relatively tall archon with flowing white hair that had a cryo samachurl on either side of him, but the other two archons were unguarded and wore no armor at all.

“Kimaris!” The young archon cheered as they entered the room. “Long time no see, you fiery demon, you. How’s the wife?” He leaned forward, smiling cheekily.

“Still single, Asmody, my friend.” Zhui smiled back, a little less energetically. “And I have been going by Zhui in the last centuries, if you please.”

“I do please!” The archon rocked his stone seat backwards on two legs. “I’ve been going by Hunao.”

“Hunao?” Zhui asked.

“Who, now?”

“*Can we please get started?*” The deceptively slight and sweet-looking goddess in a blue and pink hanfu slammed her elegant fingers against the table. The white quartz shook. “Zhui, sit down and we can start!”

Alatus tensed. *No one talks to Zhui like that and gets away with it.*

But to his surprise, Zhui shrugged his shoulders and demurely took a seat across from the energetic young archon. “Whatever you ask, *dearest* Goddess of Serendipity, Gratum Dei, Jiyuan.” Alatus moved to stand behind him and slightly to his right, enough that he could see everything in the room at once.

The goddess, Jiyuan, scowled at the words, but she sat back down. Her pale eyes sparkled along with the little crystals that adorned her dark hair like raindrops, and her mouth was tiny, bow-shaped, and painted light pink, but Alatus could feel the waves of danger rolling off of her intense personality.

“Archons, Jiyuan. Why are you so angry all the time? You are a Hydro archon. You’re supposed to be nice and sweet and healing.” Hunao taunted, a glimmer of mischief rising in his smile.

“Do not *generalize* about Hydro users!” Jiyuan snapped, summoning a delicate lace fan and pointing it at Hunao. “Sometimes water is better to pierce than to heal.”

The other goddess, who had long brown hair in a braid so tight it looked like it hurt, tapped her short nails on the table. “Jiyuan, you are scaring Hunao’s pet human.”

“He’s not a pet human!” Hunao protested. “His name is Lei and he’s my Millelith bodyguard.”

Zhui arched one eyebrow. “You brought a human bodyguard. To a meeting of archons.”

Alatus could smell the human’s sweat underneath its Millelith armor. He fought the urge to ask to eat its dreams.

“Oh, wait, you really are scaring him.” Hunao twisted in his seat to look at the human. “Lei, are you okay? Do you need to Lei down?”

“We are starting now.” The Cryo archon, voice deep and full of authority, spoke for the first time, and the other archons snapped to attention. “The conflict in Liyue is coming to a head. The Archon War cannot continue without our participation. Share with me what you know.”

Jiyuan opened and closed her fan, over and over. “Osial will be attempting to dethrone Morax. We all know that much. He wants to flood Liyue, if not all of Teyvat, and cleanse the world of humans.”

“This will most likely end the same way it did in Mondstadt,” Zhui said, drawing circles on the table with his nail guard. “We all saw what happened to Decarabian. You have never seen an Archon of Anemo hit the ground so hard.”

“You can’t say that Barbatos hasn’t been doing a good job as the new Anemo archon,” the brown-haired archon pointed out. She turned her wrist, and a violetgrass grew around her arm. “Andrius has settled. The wolves are no longer warring with the people now that Decarabian is gone.”

Hunao reached all the way across the table and shot a bolt of fire from his fingertip into the violetgrass, earning himself an irritated hiss. “You have a low bar for ‘settled,’ Fuxing. Andrius hates the people. Why would he fight for them?”

“He does not hate *all* people.”

“Yeah? How would you know, with your head in the trees all the time? You never notice anything.”

“I know!” Fuxing snapped. Thorny vines rose up behind her threateningly. “Do not insult me, you human-loving filth. What do you know of Andrius? What do you know of *anything*? You absolute fool!”

The Cryo samachurls at the Cryo archon’s sides snapped into a ready position. Alatus’s attention darted between Fuxing and Zhui, waiting for any kind of command, but Zhui watched the drama

unfold with innocent, amused eyes.

Hunao smirked. His mischief seemed less childish and more evil. “Oh, I’m just teasing. Learn to take a joke, Fuxing.”

The Dendro archon’s eye twitched, but the vines retracted.

Jiyuan smacked her fan sharply on the top of Hunao’s head, and he yelped in surprise. “You cannot hurt someone’s feelings and play it off as a joke, you buffoon. Mind your tongue!” She tsked, giving him one more whack for good measure. “It cannot be denied that Decarabian’s people now love Barbatos, anyway. I have never seen such genuine devotion to a new member of the Seven so quickly. Mondstadt is very kind, especially to an archon that was only a sprite just a few years ago.”

Zhui inclined his head thoughtfully. “Do you believe that Decarabian’s people were not devoted to him?”

“They were afraid of him,” Jiyuan corrected him hotly. “There is a difference.”

“Hm.” Zhui elegantly rested his chin on the backs of his interlaced hands. “Do you believe that the Liyuen people do not fear Morax?”

Fuxing snapped her head up at the name of Morax. “The people love Rex Lapis more than they fear him.”

Alatus shifted his weight. Love and fear, fear and love. Where did true power come from?

“I did not call you all here to discuss the source of Morax’s power.” The Cryo archon’s voice cut the room again, low and commanding. He seemed to dislike the sound of his own voice, or any loud sound at all. “That does not matter now. I called you here to ask what you plan to do about Osial’s uprising against Morax. Tell me.”

Hunao grinned, once again rocking his chair, not noticing (or simply ignoring) the very sweaty, slightly green-in-the-face Millelith soldier at his side. “I like humans. I think they’re funny. If Osial wipes them all out, what am I going to do?” He held his hand out. Lei scrambled, reaching into his belt pouch, and handed Hunao a Jueyan Guoba. Hunao crunched the snack down in two bites. “And I can’t just *not* eat food of this quality for the rest of eternity. I will probably fight for Rex Lapis, when it comes to it.”

Alatus blinked at the smell of Jueyan chilies. It was too strong, attacking his sinuses and sinking into the surface of his eyes. His stomach turned a bit at the thought of chewing down on boar flesh. Odd.

“I do not trust Osial,” Jiyuan frowned. Her pretty hands toyed with the Hydro orb around her neck, and her blue hanfu made soft swishing sounds as she adjusted herself in her seat. “I do not feel any kind of way about the humans, but as an archon that relies on the waters, I feel that having Osial in power would be a mistake. When it comes to it, I too will be fighting for Rex Lapis.” Her delicate features were still twisted in scorn, but her jaw was firmly set in her decision.

Zhui turned to Fuxing, who was growing sweet flowers all around her to combat the strong smell of cooked Jueyan chilies. “How about you, Fuxing? I know you hate humans as much as I do.” His voice was indulgent and probing.

Fuxing’s eyebrows knit nearly all the way together above her nose. “I do.” She was playing with the large silk flower at the end of her braid, changing its color from white to pink to red. “I hate

humans. They ruin the plants everywhere, they waste Jueyan chilies to make smelly food like whatever that was, and they tear up my glaze lilies. But..." Her soft green eyes misted over, and she suddenly seemed very far away.

Alatus was familiar enough with Zhui's body language at this point to tell that his anger was starting to rise. The karma archon's voice was dangerously soft as he spoke. "But what, Fuxing?"

"But then I found out that they offer the glaze lilies to Rex Lapis," she said, voice full of wonder, twirling her plait like a schoolgirl in love. "The people really do adore him. He is strong, and tall, and very handsome, and truly worthy of his seat with the Seven..." She blinked rapidly, as if suddenly remembering where she was and who she was talking to. "I do despise the humans. But I will not fight against Rex Lapis." The flower in her hands stayed a steady pink.

The Cryo archon nodded slowly before directing his attention to Zhui. "Karma Dei, Kimaris, Zhui. What are you thinking?"

Alatus's hands curled into fists. He could sense that Zhui had summoned his yaksha mask under the quartz table.

"I can sense all of your karma," Zhui said, voice flat. "You all have your reasons for your actions, but every action has an equal opposite reaction, and ultimately, I am the one at this table with the cleanest karmic slate."

Hunao chuckled nervously, feeling the atmosphere in the room beginning to shift. "Well, then, Zhui, what's your secret?"

Zhui did not move a muscle. "I never do anything bad." He tapped the mask, and Alatus tensed. "Alatus, kill everything in this room."

"What?!" Jiyuan screeched, and Alatus snatched his spear from the air.

The order shouldn't have worked. It was too vague. If Alatus had had the mind to resist the command, he could have.

But he did not.

Nausea from the sweet flowers and Jueyan chilies mixing in the air, the excitement of knowing he was stronger than not one but four archons, the confusion of power, the fear of some kind of terrible punishment upon return to the blackstone castle — all of these were enough reasons for Alatus to act.

But really, he only had one thought as he moved.

I wonder what the dreams of an archon will taste like.

Distantly, he could hear screaming, could feel fire, thorns, and jetstreams of water barraging his body, but the promise of sweet textured dreams gave him the energy to continue with his attack. Alatus's eyes clouded over and his breathing came in short bursts of air; he hardly noticed as his spear pierced gossamer fabric and ancient power, barely felt as he tore the shades from the Cryo samachurls and inhaled their dreams, faintly acknowledged the copious amount of blood that was not his own spattering the walls and coating his spear and arms.

The archons wanted power. He could feel it. They wanted to rule over the humans, to rule over the waters, to kill the humans, to be one of the Seven of Teyvat, to fuck Rex Lapis, to control the Abyss, to become the Archon of All Things...

It was almost too much life, and Alatus let himself drown in it. Joy. Adrenaline. Hope. *Ecstasy*.

“Stop.”

That was a command.

Alatus swallowed, still glowing with the effects of three archon dreams. His spear was just a few centimeters from the Cryo archon's chest.

He panted from the effort of what he'd just done. The room was still, but it spun in Alatus's vision. He could see a bloody, limp hand in the corner of his eye. His own hair was matted with blood and singed, dripping from a place on the back of his head where a vine had torn his scalp.

It didn't even hurt.

You did this. You did this. *You. Did. This.*

Zhui was speaking, and Alatus fought to pay attention.

“An-ning,” Zhui addressed the icy archon before him. “Where do you stand in this Archon War? Choose your answer wisely.”

The Cryo archon, An-ning, had pure white eyes that contrasted sharply with Zhui's black ones. He looked directly into Alatus's gilt eyes, and the yaksha's mind twisted with confusion. An-ning did not speak for a long moment, but when he did, his every word was very calculated.

“I am the Archon of Tranquility. You have known this for a long time. All I want is quiet.” An-ning's voice was low and slow. “Tranquility is not peace. I do not yearn for peace, nor do I care for the humans. If it pleases you, Kimaris, I will stay neutral. I will not fight Morax, nor will I defend Osial. I hope this answer meets your satisfaction, but if it does not, I accept your power and judgement.” He did not break eye contact with Alatus throughout his whole speech.

Zhui had not bothered to stand from his position at the table. He casually scraped some stray blood spatter off of his gauntlet. “I accept your decision to stay neutral. I know this is your castle, but I recommend you go quickly from this place.”

An-ning nodded once. He inclined his head to Alatus, who stared dumbly back, before disappearing in a whirl of snowflakes.

Zhui stood, being careful to step over the carnage, crystal beads, and tattered bits of hanfu at his feet. “That was eventful,” he commented. “You did well, Alatus. You can move.”

Alatus collapsed his weight onto his spear, holding himself upright. The pain of the burns that he had and the places where water had blasted away his skin was starting to settle in. He was still glowing with the joy and adrenaline from the dreams, but the feeling of dread was building in his heart. “Thank you, Master.”

“Don't look at this mess,” Zhui said behind him. He could hear Zhui's armored foot kick at the chestplate that had once been Hunao's. “It will just upset you.”

“Yes.” The bloodbath was bad enough that Zhui told him not to look at it. He had caused a scene that was difficult for even Zhui to look at it.

Zhui seemed to realize that Alatus was not fully present and did not push him to talk. “I'll make you a poultice for your wounds when we get home. I promise you will feel better soon.”

The words were empty. The transportation, or whatever enchantment Zhui cast to bring them back to the blackstone castle, was a blur that Alatus could not have seen even with his eyes open.

He was laying down on a blackstone block when he finally came back into full awareness. His wrists were chained to the sides of the block while Zhui patched up his cuts and burns.

He'd killed archons. *Archons*. Archons, which all his life he'd assumed couldn't die, had fallen by his hand. Alatus had always been terrified of being strong, and now the thought twisted his heart. *He had killed and eaten the dreams of archons.*

"You should sleep. It will help you to heal faster." Zhui's voice, soft and suggestive, halted Alatus's thoughts.

"I do not sleep." The words were automatic. He would never sleep again. He'd rather suffer through the slow healing. He tested the chain on his wrist, and of course it held just as the usual ones did.

Zhui sighed. "How many years have we been together now, Alatus? Why do you still question me?" He stroked Alatus's cheek with the back of his knuckles, and Alatus turned his head to the side to avoid it. "All you are is a weapon. You do not need to fight me anymore. Why don't you find some solace in that?" His hand stilled on Alatus's face. "Close your eyes."

"I'm *fine*." He hissed the words through gritted teeth.

"I insist." Zhui ordered. "Sleep. *Now*."

The command did not stop Alatus from clinging to consciousness as long as he could before falling into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

lol it was so fun, and then it just wasn't // the story really writes itself

thank you to my beta for helping me come up with the oc archons ^^

im Chinese but i understand that sometimes names are odd so i did my best with what i knew. i hope it worked out lol

Jiyuan 机缘 - serendipity/luck

Hunao 胡闹 - mischief/ "monkey business"

Fuxing 复兴 - rejuvenation/complex revival

An-Ning 安宁 - preference for safety/quiet

thanks for reading!!! i love your comments so feed me please ^^

Here Comes the Darkness Again

Chapter Summary

Zhui was still talking, waving his arms dramatically and pacing back and forth. “Osial is a pretentious prat that believes that now is the Age of Archons, which it is, but he thinks that there is nothing stronger than archons. And he is wrong. I know, because I’ve seen you.” Zhui grinned down at Alatus. “And today, he will see you too! Then I will no longer have to be attempting to fight in those little battles that Osial picks all the time. I do not appreciate that Geo whale that Morax summons.” He scowled, lost in thought for a moment.

Alatus’s eye twitched. *I do not want to meet Osial.*

“I do not think you are stronger than Morax, or anything ridiculous like that. But you are definitely strong enough to be fighting out there instead of stuck in here, and I simply need Osial to be on the same page as I am about having you around.” He stopped pacing to squint at Alatus. “Wouldn’t you rather be where the action is?”

No. “Whatever you want.”

Chapter Notes

Tw: blood/gore/assault; gaslighting; ya boi has PTSD.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He couldn’t breathe.

The air was boiling hot and humid, slipping thickly in and out of his lungs without delivering any oxygen to him. It smelled and tasted like iron, vaguely familiar. He could feel that his eyes were shut, but he could sense a faint red glow through his eyelids, not unlike the blackstone of the cold room he had grown familiar with.

Breathe. Extremely slowly in, extremely slowly out.

His ears were ringing, but he could hear something else, slowly getting louder; a wet, squishing, nasty sound unlike anything he’d ever heard before.

He opened his eyes and screamed.

He was splayed out, suspended over a pile of bodies, putrefying, stinking, rotting, flesh liquefying off the bones, *crawling with worms that mashed and squirmed as they burrowed into what remained*. Alatus gasped at the thick air that he finally realized was blood mist. He thrashed, and karmic binds bit into his skin.

They were *everywhere*, circling his neck, wrapping around his waist, all the way up and down his

legs, sharp and cutting as wire, threatening to pull him apart more than iron chains ever could. The more he saw, the less he could control his breathing, his motions, his thoughts, he couldn't wake up, couldn't get away, couldn't stop screaming, couldn't stop seeing the bodies below him, couldn't block out the memories of their deaths...

There was no end to it. There would be no end to it. There was no solace in unconsciousness and no solace in death. Life was hell. Sleep was hell. Death was hell.

No escape.

Hell. In all directions. For all time.

All.

Time.

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"Alatus, wake up!"

Alatus crashed awake with a gasp, more relieved than he'd ever been to be back in the cold stone room, on this cold stone block, with the freezing iron chains on his wrists and ankles. He lifted his hand as much as he could, searching for the wire-thin cuts that he was positive would be covering his skin, and was even more startled to see that he was fine.

Zhui's eyes over him were wide and concerned. "You were only asleep for a minute. But you were screaming."

Alatus bit his lip, trying to ground himself and stop shaking. His voice came out more like a sob. "I told you." He swallowed. "I told you, I don't sleep. I can't sleep. You made me sleep." He felt like a child, breathing hard through his mouth, promising to never take the scoured air for granted again. Dreams. He needed dreams. He needed to distract from whatever nightmare that had been.

"I do not make you do things anymore," Zhui frowned.

Alatus gritted his teeth, spitting at the taste of blood in his mouth, fighting the feeling of bile rising in his throat. "You made me sleep."

Zhui folded his arms. "You're imagining things. You were so tired and wiped out after the archon meeting that you fell asleep. Did you dream? Did you see the karmic binds?"

Alatus didn't hear the question. His head was spinning. "I have been more tired than that before and not fallen asleep. Please don't make me sleep again. Please." He turned his face to the side, bringing his hand up to cover his eyes. The blackness was better than the red glow from the fires

and the red glow of the stone.

He could hear Zhui bustling about, but he couldn't bring himself to care about why. "I'd never do such a thing to you, and I cannot believe you would suggest it in the first place. I won't hear any more about it." He paused. Alatus did not respond. "You can lie down tonight. You did well today." His armored footsteps clacked against the floor, and Alatus heard the blackstone door open. "Tomorrow... Tomorrow will be another day."

The door closed. He was alone again.

What a comfort, to be alone, to have the freedom to touch his own face with his own hand.

Every day was a fresh hell.

He forced himself not to wonder what the next hell would be.

I will never fall asleep again.

◇ ◇ ◇

His master did not return the next day. Or for a while after that.

That was fine. Alatus did not mind.

When Zhui did return what felt like many days later, he was fuming, and Alatus immediately wished he would go away again.

"This is your fault, Alatus," he seethed, releasing the yaksha's chains. They rattled as they retracted, and Alatus sat up slowly. "If you weren't so insanely *powerful*, I would not be falling out of practice, and I would not be in this position that I'm in right now."

Alatus pressed the muscles in his calves, never quite getting used to the blood rush; his head spun from the orientation, just as it always did, just like every time for the past years.

Zhui was still talking, waving his arms dramatically and pacing back and forth. "Osial is a pretentious prat that believes that now is the Age of Archons, which it is, but he thinks that there is nothing stronger than archons. And he is wrong. I know, because I've seen you." Zhui grinned down at Alatus. "And today, he will see you too! Then I will no longer have to be attempting to fight in those little battles that Osial picks all the time. I do not appreciate that Geo whale that Morax summons." He scowled, lost in thought for a moment.

Alatus's eye twitched. *I do not want to meet Osial.*

"I do not think you are stronger than Morax, or anything ridiculous like that. But you are definitely strong enough to be fighting out there instead of stuck in here, and I simply need Osial to be on the same page as I am about having you around." He stopped pacing to squint at Alatus. "Wouldn't you rather be where the action is?"

No. "Whatever you want."

Zhui's mouth quirked in a smile. "Good boy!" He glowed, mood shifting quickly from irritation to joy. "We are going to Guyun today, because I suppose Chi's vault is the base or whatever." He looked at Alatus expectantly. "Will you be good?"

Alatus's eyelids mechanically slid open and shut over his eyes. They felt glassy and burned a little

when shut. “Yes. Master.”

His legs buckled when he walked. He kept looking down at his arms, expecting to see the wirecuts julienning his skin from the karmic binds. It felt almost wrong for the skin there to be so unbroken, save for some rawness from the iron cuff. He pressed his nail sharply into his forearm where the karmic binds had been, relieved to feel and see the crescent indent that he left behind.

Osial... Alatus did not know much about Osial. Someone, a long time ago, had told him stories of Morax fighting some sea monster, or sea god, but the details were fuzzy in Alatus's mind. Perhaps he had been a sea monster that could take a personlike form; or a person that could take a sea monster form; at the very least, Alatus knew, Osial was a Hydro user that could appear as a giant sea monster with multiple heads. He could prepare himself to meet a sea monster with a few heads. He would not speak, not react, not interact with the archon at all; just let Zhui do all the talking and accept whatever came next.

He was *not* expecting the Overlord of the Vortex to be a man with long, floaty blue hair, a half-open navy hanfu hanging almost completely off his shoulders, and a lazy smile on his face. Osial looked as though he was a human that had just rolled out of bed after sleeping in for an entire weekend, putting the bare minimum amount of effort into looking presentable for a surprise guest. He wasn't even in his own space, sitting regally on a rock between two large chunks of amber. Chi of Guyun's vault was underground, not very close to saltwater, and quite literally the last place Alatus would have thought to find any Hydro sea archon. There was a shallow pond of freshwater that somehow pooled at the lowest point of the cavern, still not enough to justify Osial setting up a base here.

Despite Osial's laid-back appearance, Alatus could feel the waves of majestic Hydro power rolling off of him, sending a shiver down his spine.

“That is a yaksha.” Osial stated simply when he first laid eyes on Alatus. His voice was not loud, but it carried authority. He swirled a wine glass around in his hand, sniffing it before taking a sip. “Kimaris, do not try to convince me that you believe I am weaker than a simple *yaksha*.”

“Oh, I would never, Lord Osial.” Zhui smiled sweetly. “There is indeed nothing stronger than you are. I brought him here today to make the argument that he is stronger than *me*. You see, I usually have him fight for me, and as the Archon of Karma, I deal primarily in the things that come *after* life...”

He was rambling. Alatus blinked, staring at his own slippered feet in the grass. He had never heard Zhui ramble this way before, as if he was nervous.

Osial's ominously pale blue eyes narrowed over the rim of his glass as he took another sip. He stood and moved closer to Alatus, looking him up and down, dematerializing the glass in his hand and curling his fingers. He was extremely tall, taller than Zhui, and matching in menacing energy.

Alatus could feel the archon's gaze lingering, and his skin crawled. He suddenly felt itchy and uncomfortable, tugging his sleeves lower over his hands and bowing his head so that his dark hair curtained his face. He could sense Zhui's disapproval, but somehow he knew that with Osial's presence, Zhui was not his biggest problem.

He sensed the greatness of Osial's power moving around him, stopping somewhere close behind him. A startlingly warm hand reached out to move his hair away from his neck and trailed down, gliding along the muscles in his shoulders and stopping at the small of his back. Alatus bit his lip, not daring to move away from the immense power behind him.

“How unfair,” Osial commented, “that something like a yaksha gets to be both strong and stunning. He should have been an archon.” A fingertip stroked his spine through the thin material of his tunic, and Alatus squeezed his eyes shut tight.

“That’s exactly what I said, too, my Lord!” Zhui agreed enthusiastically. “You should see him in action, though; he really is a magnificent fighter —”

“I do not wish to hear your opinion, Kimaris.” Osial interrupted, and Zhui immediately clamped his mouth shut. Osial’s voice was hot water just about to boil over. “We are in the Age of Archons. We do not require assistance from *yaksha*.” His voice lowered to a steaming hiss, and he reached out to loosen Alatus’s sleeve from his deeply clenched fist before sliding his hand back up. “What is your name, yaksha?”

Alatus looked at Zhui for permission to speak, but Osial gently turned his head back forward. “Do not look at him. Answer me.”

He swallowed the dread in his throat. “I... I am Alatus.”

“Alatus. How ethereal.” Osial strolled back into Alatus’s line of sight, toweringly close. The top of Alatus’s head barely cleared his shoulders. “Who gave you this name?”

Who gave me this name? Alatus struggled to clear the cobwebs from his mind. Someone. Someone special. Someone who cared about him gave him this name. “My fa... My fellow yaksha named me.”

Osial’s pale blue eyebrows shot up in mild surprise. “Your fellow yaksha. I only know of the yaksha of Jueyan Karst. I never knew there was an Anemo yaksha among them.”

Zhui coughed once, but Osial ignored him.

“Do you know what I heard the other day, Alatus?” Osial asked. He patted Alatus’s cheek, clearly expecting an answer.

“No.” Alatus answered. The hand on his face was uncomfortably warm, and Osial was too close. He smelled like boiling seawater and sulfur.

“No, *my Lord*,” Zhui encouraged.

“No, my Lord.” The words felt wrong.

Osial smiled. His mouth stretched unnaturally wide. “I heard there is not one, not two, but three new yaksha making appearances around Jueyan Karst.”

Alatus’s heart twisted.

“Would you like to hear about them?” Osial continued. His thumb stroked Alatus’s cheekbone. He did not wait for an answer. “There is a little Geo one now, much smaller than the old one with the broadsword; I remember a Dendro user, though I do not know much about him, and an aggressive Cryo yaksha with snowflakes all over. Admittedly, they do not emit as much power as you do, probably even with all their might combined.” He leaned forward and pulled Alatus’s face upwards, forcing the yaksha to look him in the eye. “They are also, without a doubt, not as attractive as you are.”

Alatus pressed his eyes shut again.

He had not asked for power. He had not asked to be so desired. If things such as beauty and power only caused this kind of painful life, he did not want them. He could remember his family. He could remember the time before this.

But now it seemed they had replaced him.

Osial snaked his hand around Alatus's neck, wove through the hair above his nape, and tilted his head to one side before darting forward and licking a long stripe from Alatus's collarbone to his ear.

The sensation was wet and rough and foreign and intrusive and horrifying enough that Alatus's eyes flew open and he gasped. He instinctively raised his hand to cover the sound, but Osial caught his wrist. "Oh, no, don't do that, little Alatus," Osial cooed, a psychotic gleam crossing his darkening eyes. "What other pretty sounds can I force out of you?"

"My Lord." Zhui's voice was steadier, more firm than before. There was an edge to it that Alatus didn't quite recognize. "If you do not intend on using him against Morax, I will be taking him away from the battlefield."

Alatus didn't even breathe, head tilted back as far as he could, sight focused on the roof of the cavern, but he could still see Osial's eyes on him. His neck was cold where Osial's tongue had touched him, though the hand around his wrist was almost feverishly hot. The Hydro power he felt was overwhelming as the endless depths of the ocean, but he could sense that the real power came from Osial's own awareness of his might and the carelessness with which Osial threw his authority around.

"Aw." Osial did not look away from Alatus. "Are you territorial, Kimaris? Are you unwilling to share? Did I make you jealous?" He clicked his tongue wetly. "Are you afraid he will like me more than you?"

Zhui was quiet. Alatus kept his eyes on the roof. His chest was starting to ache from the breath he was holding, but he did not want to make any sound.

"Ah, now you've made me feel bad." Osial's tone was lazy and not at all apologetic. "I will let you take your little weapon home, but really, what a shame that you use him as a weapon." He dragged his hand slowly through the length of Alatus's hair. "In the Age of Archons, archons are the only beings that matter. All other beings are tools. And tools have... Multiple uses." His fingers caught on a tangle near the end of Alatus's hair, tearing the strands apart, stopping to rest low on his hip. He pulled Alatus close to him, arching his spine, pressing him flush against his own mostly-bare chest. The other hand released Alatus's wrist, and he pushed two fingers roughly into Alatus's mouth to hook over his bottom teeth.

Alatus nearly gagged, biting down on the ancient hand that did not yield even a fraction of a millimeter. Saliva pooled under his tongue.

I am a statue, Alatus thought. The inhale he took in through his nostrils was slow and as quiet as he could possibly make it. I am a statue. I do not breathe. My eyes do not get bigger when I am afraid. I do not taste rust. I do not taste salt. There is no tingling feeling in my skin, no need to scratch, no need to wash myself until I can't feel his hands on me again, no dirtiness, none of it, no eyes on me, no in no out no breath. *I am a statue I feel nothing nothing nothing—*

"That's enough, Osial." Zhui snapped, snatching Alatus by the elbow and pulling him away from the sea god, who easily let go. "It's an even greater shame that you would not see the combat potential in him. I swore my allegiance to you, and I will honor that contract, but I pray to Morax

that he will summon that Geo whale a thousand times over just to spite you. Thank you for your audience.”

His hand was hot on Alatus’s elbow, but it didn’t have the same dirty feeling that Osial did. Alatus imagined the burn of Zhui’s Pyro energy scalding him, cleansing him of Osial’s salt and touch. He wanted to spit, wanted to tear his teeth out, wanted to throw up all the acid in his stomach, wanted to scrub his skin off until there was nothing left.

“Thank you for your yaksha,” Osial responded. That terrible smile had not once moved from his face. “Don’t miss me too much, Alatus.”

If he had wanted to stop them, he could have with no effort at all.

Alatus, Alatus, Alatus.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

◇ ◇ ◇

Zhui did not break contact with Alatus the entire way back to the blackstone room, and when he finally released him it was only to savagely backhand him across the face with his gauntlet.

Alatus welcomed the pain, allowing the blood collecting in his mouth to wash away the lingering taste of Osial’s fingers. He coughed once, spraying red droplets across the floor.

“That wouldn’t have happened if you didn’t look at him like that!” Zhui said through clenched teeth. “You and your *face* and your *eyes*, practically begging him to take you away from me... Is that what you wanted? Is that what you wanted him to do?”

He was expecting an answer. “No, Master,” Alatus choked out. He rubbed his neck.

“Now I have to fight Morax and his stupid, non-archon support, as if I’ve been maintaining my combat form over the last years.” Zhui sighed. “I hope you’re happy about this. I freely admit that you’re stronger than me. But I hope you know that it’s *because* of me that you are strong.”

He summoned the chains from the walls, and Alatus was almost, *almost* relieved to slump into the iron.

Zhui sighed, folding his arms and glaring at the yaksha. “You had better pray that I don’t die once and lose my physical body while I’m out there fighting week-long battles with Morax. No one will ever find you here, and then you will just be stuck alone forever.” He scratched his head, muttering carelessly as he left the blackstone room. “I wonder if my will could manifest and come back here. I would cause so much chaos as a demon-spirit.”

The doors slammed shut behind him.

Alatus couldn’t process what had happened to him that day. He had felt all kinds of conflicting energy: territorial jealousy, wonder, frustration... And something else he couldn’t name. Something he had felt maybe once before in a dream, close to admiration but not quite, a little like desire but strange and possessive and unwelcome and dirty.

Whatever it was, it was violating.

And he couldn’t shake the feeling that it was his fault somehow, his fault for being beautiful, for being powerful, for being alive at all.

He couldn't bring himself to think about Zhui dying and leaving him here forever, either. Forever was a long time. He couldn't wrap his mind around the concept. Forever with iron clamped around his wrists and ankles, forever with the dim red light of the blackstone, forever with nothing to hear but his own thoughts, forever stuck in this hell.

Then again.

Hell for Alatus would not look much different from his current days.

Fresh hell was in every direction.

He closed his eyes, just to immerse himself in the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

oh, being simultaneously touch-starved and revolted by touch, that's a positive memory innit // okay let's not go there : 'D

Stay tuned for good things ~

From Now On

Chapter Summary

On the days that Zhui managed to return, he was always in a terrible mood. Some days he was content to take Alatus to kill a few humans, some of which were starting to call themselves “Treasure Hoarders,” and allowed him to eat their dreams while he watched in sulking silence.

But most days were not so good, and both Alatus’s silence and his responses only fanned the flames of his master’s temper. Sometimes Zhui would just scream at him. Other times he would choke or burn him. Since joining Osial’s forces, Zhui had ceased bothering to heal him or offer any kind of care that he usually did afterwards.

Alatus was never sure how to feel when his master walked in; his emotions varied deeply between absolute dread and sweet relief from no longer being alone.

So when Zhui burst through the blackstone doors at full speed, slamming them behind him, crossing them shut with wide rods of iron, and throwing aside a pyre to press himself into the nearest corner, panting and sweating heavily, Alatus wasn’t sure what to think.

The next stretch of time was a blur for Alatus. He seemed to be spending a lot of time alone in the darkness.

It wasn’t always awful, as long as he could stay awake. He could feel the weariness of monotony sinking into his consciousness, but the thought of the karma raging his soul always brought him back. Calling back the memories of emotions from dreams helped, but they weren’t the same as consuming new dreams.

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In all these years, he realized, he had never actually seen Zhui run. Or struggle to catch his breath. Or look so...

Desperate.

“What is happening, Master?” Alatus asked. His voice was a little hoarse from underuse.

“*Shut your bitch mouth,*” Zhui hissed, black eyes flashing.

Alatus blinked. He flexed his wrists against the chains.

There was a loud boom from somewhere above them.

“This is a private domain,” Zhui was muttering, barely loud enough for Alatus to hear. “He can’t find us here, *this is a private domain*, I enchanted it myself...” He huffed, pressing his hand against his shoulder. Blood leaked out between his fingers.

What had happened? Alatus knit his eyebrows.

“Alatus, whatever happens, I order you to protect me,” Zhui demanded through clenched teeth.

And then the doors crashed open in a blaze of golden light.

Alatus squeezed his eyes shut against the harsh glare. This was the brightest the room had ever been, and the most light he’d seen in what felt like days.

“‘Those who break their contracts shall suffer the Wrath of the Rock.’ If anyone knows this to be true, Karma Dei, it should be you.”

The new voice was deep but flat, as if simply speaking facts without any heat. Alatus could sense the great power of the speaker, resonating through the blackstone walls, asserting strength in every word, but he was confused by the lack of anger behind the might.

“We never made a contract!” Zhui was yelling, shielding his eyes from the light. “I have broken no contracts with you!”

Ah. Alatus opened his eyes, just enough to look through his lashes.

A tall figure all dressed in white was silhouetted in the doorway, stepping forward over cracked shards of iron and blackstone, exuding pure Geo energy; a glowing kongming lock levitated above his outstretched hand, which glowed with gold markings all the way up his powerful arms.

This, then, was Rex Lapis.

Alatus shivered.

“You are meant to be the Archon of Karma. When did you start seeing yourself as the Deliverer of Justice? Who gave you this right, or this role?” The light dimmed slightly, enough that Alatus could see Morax’s brilliant amber eyes brimming with power. “You do not enter another archon’s abode as a guest, murder everyone else present, and then threaten the life of the host; unspoken contracts are still contracts, Kimaris, and no one in the history of time has violated hospitality the way that you have.” The kongming lock rotated in its place above the god’s hand.

“There was no formal contract! An-ning did not even live there! By welcoming in this group of archons in the first place, he should have *known* that there would be tensions!” Zhui pushed himself further into the corner. For all his defensive words, fear was flashing in his eyes. “I broke no contract, Morax. You should be punishing An-ning for his failure to *make* a contract!”

Rex Lapis turned at the door, facing Zhui dead-on. The kongming lock started spinning faster and

gathering more energy into itself. “You are always blaming others for your own failings, but contracts cannot be passed off, Kimaris. *You* honor the agreements that you make. There are no exceptions.” He folded his arms across his chest.

“If you cannot hold to the least of the contracts, why should I believe you hold to those that you made with me?”

The kongming lock started expanding to the size of a boulder. Zhui shrieked pathetically, and Alatus frowned.

“I murdered no one! I have not murdered in eons! All the deaths that I have ever caused were out of the mercy of my heart!” Zhui stabbed his finger vigorously in Alatus’s direction. “I never murdered anyone! It was all *him*! Take one look at him, and I am sure, Morax, you will *feel* how ravaged his soul is by karma. *He* deserves the Wrath of the Rock, not me!”

What surprised Alatus the most was that he felt nothing at those words. Mostly, he just felt tired. Of course, this was how he would be delivered to eternal karmic binds and blood mist, the fate that he deserved, sold out by his master to be crushed by the Archon of Contracts in consequence for years of slaughter.

Inhale in. Exhale out.

He wondered dully if he would be able to remember the taste of dreams. He tugged on his chains once, just to brace himself for the inevitable impact of the ever-growing kongming lock —

“*Whose hand was it that held the tool?*” Rex Lapis demanded, anger creeping into his voice for the first time. “You are the Archon of Karma, and you have the gall to believe that because your hands did not *personally* kill your fellow gods, you will face no consequences?” The kongming lock, truly the size of a meteor at this point, stopped spinning and hovered in the room. “You are not worthy of your title. You are not worthy of your physical body.”

“*Alatus!*” Zhui screamed desperately, his nails clawing at the smooth floor. “*Save me!*”

Alatus’s arms jerked against his chains in an attempt to summon his black tassel, but not even a direct order could free him from his restraints. He grimaced at the iron straining his skin open, dripping blood down his arms.

Rex Lapis’s amber eyes were cold and merciless. “May order guide you, Kimaris. I pray you find justice wherever your spirit is going.”

“*No!*” Zhui screamed, holding out his arm in a futile attempt to protect himself, blasting just a useless smear of Pyro energy before the massive Geo meteor struck.

Alatus turned away from the brightness as the kongming lock crushed his master into the blackstone, sending shockwaves through the ground and walls, shattering tiles and sending sparks flying. The sound was sickening, fascinating, splashing and crashing and grating and cracking and clinking and cacophonously loud. No living being could have survived that kind of impact.

Zhui’s red sword, a few beads from the ends of his hair, and something else went skittering across the floor in the silence that followed. Rex Lapis bent to pick it up.

It was Alatus’s mask.

His limbs had relaxed in the irons the moment the meteor hit, and he knew that Zhui’s physical body was dead. He couldn’t control him anymore.

His mind twisted in confusion.

The mask was in Rex Lapis's hands now. What did that mean? Was Rex Lapis going to kill him? Was he just going to make him into another weapon? What happened now? He didn't know how to think. He rattled a chain, pulling it hard against his wrist. Even as the walls were shattering, the fucking irons held him as securely as ever —

“You are a yaksha.” Rex Lapis said softly, taking a few tentative steps towards Alatus, eyes wide. “The Anemo yaksha. What are you doing in a place like this?” He reached out his golden hands, and Alatus recoiled sharply.

The archon instantly stopped all motion, stepping back, allowing Alatus to see him fully. His eyes glowed amber, burnt umber at the edges, lined with red that marked him as a Liyue divinity. His hair was extremely long, falling to his knees, neatly tied back and tinted golden at the ends. Alatus marveled at the sharp contrast between the god's white sleeveless hooded robe and the dark, gold-marked skin on his arms; this was what true power looked like, fearless, uninhibited, with no need for heavy defensive armor.

“I am Morax, the Archon of Geo and Liyue. What is your name?”

His voice was gentle.

The yaksha opened his mouth to answer, but he couldn't bring himself to form the word.

Alatus. *Alatus*.

The name turned to poison on his tongue. He didn't want to hear it anymore. He didn't want to hear it ever again. “I...” He shook and dropped his head forward. His hair swept over his shoulders, hiding the archon from his sight.

Rex Lapis seemed to understand. “What do you do?”

“I don't know.” He kept his eyes on the cracked floor at Morax's golden feet.

“What *can* you do?” Rex Lapis asked, cautiously.

I don't know. “I did what he told me.”

He heard the archon take a deep breath. “What commands did he give you?”

His mind was dusty. Decades of fearful lies and commands not to answer this very question clouded his memory. “He told me...” He swallowed. “He told me to kill.”

“Tell me more.” Rex Lapis's voice was calm, not accusing at all.

He exhaled slowly. “I killed thousands... Humans, qilin, archons... All of them. I killed them...” He couldn't withhold any truth from the Lord of Liyue himself. “I killed them, and I ate their dreams.”

Geo energy pulsed through the air. He winced and looked up at the god.

Rex Lapis glowed gold with anger, amber eyes narrowed, a death grip on Alatus's mask.

This was the end, then; he was unforgivable. He was a murderer. He had slaughtered those he had promised to protect, had killed those he had no right to even serve, and violated their deaths by consuming their dreams. Why would Rex Lapis forgive him, much less *spare* him? His eyes stung,

and he shut them tight.

“He did this to you.”

What?

Alatus looked up again.

“He did this to you,” Rex Lapis repeated. His voice shook with barely-contained anger. “He made you a slave.” His glowing eyes raked over Alatus’s bleeding arms, the bruises on his throat, and the ruined burned skin on his chest from Zhui’s latest temper loss. “He tortured you, made you a slave, nothing more than a *weapon* for himself, and he *dared* to speak of his own karmic slate?” His eyes blazed, and he strode closer to Alatus. The yaksha barely had time to blink before Morax tore the chains from his arms and knelt to break the shackles off his ankles, as effortlessly as if they were made of wet clay.

Alatus collapsed to his knees the way he always did, almost falling onto the archon before him.

Rex Lapis reached out, and Alatus instinctively jerked away — but the god thrust the yaksha mask into his hand and clasped his own golden palms around it, curling Alatus’s fingers tightly onto the cool ceramic. “Regain yourself, yaksha. What happened to you is not your fault, yet it will fall on you to heal from it.” The words were earnest. “I swear this to you now: *you will never have to be afraid of me*. I will never let anything take from you your freedom again.” Rex Lapis lowered his own head, *the Archon of Geo himself lowered his own head*, and amber met gold as he looked the yaksha directly in the eyes. “I will never hurt you. This I promise you on my own name as the Archon of Contracts.”

Alatus’s heart twisted, and he nodded once, fighting to believe the promise as he clutched his own mask for the first time in ages.

Rex Lapis smiled, genuine, thoughtful, kind and sure. “In the fables of another world, the name Xiao is that of a spirit who encountered great suffering and hardship. He endured much suffering, as you have.” He held the yaksha’s hand a little tighter. “Will you use this name from now on?”

Xiao. The Liyuen word had many meanings; faithfulness, smallness, the act of piercing, the act of smiling... It was abrupt, clipped, and almost abrasive in sound.

“I am Xiao, the Anemo yaksha.” The name settled into his soul.

Perfect.

Rex Lapis smiled deeper, and the yaksha almost smiled back. “I am honored and overjoyed to meet you, Xiao.”

Striking

Chapter Summary

There had always been a small lake at the top of the mountain, similar to the crane pond he had loved at Mount Hulao, but a little island had been newly formed in the center of the lake. As they approached, he could see several cloud-shaped stones that made a makeshift path to the island, where someone had planted a ginkgo tree and placed a stone table.

It was pleasant. It was cute. It felt almost too good, too clean and pure for someone like Xiao.

“This is the place in Liyue that I call home,” Rex Lapis said. The words rumbled through his body, rippling the umber scales under Xiao’s hands.

Xiao nodded slowly, adjusting to the newness of the mountain; of course, it couldn’t have actually been new. It was only new to him.

He’d been gone for so long.

Chapter Notes

Pages of sweetness to make up for seven chapters of hell lol

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Never in all of Xiao’s life could he ever have imagined *meeting* Rex Lapis, much less seeing his true form in real life. He must have been dreaming, he thought, or insane, to be riding on the back of Rex Lapis’s half-dragon, half-qilin form, twisting his hands into the dragon’s soft mane, watching as the archon summoned a massive stele that destroyed the blackstone doors of what Xiao now knew was a pocket dimension domain in Eastern Liyue. Rex Lapis’s horns glinted burnished gold in the dawn, and the slowly rising sun cast soft shadows across the land. The air at this height was cleaner than Xiao had tasted in ages, fresh-scented like snow but warm with summer.

He still could not quite believe he was actually free. He ran his fingers over the surface of his mask, hanging once again at his right hip, and let out a small breath of relief.

Rex Lapis flew across Liyue, and Xiao drank in as much of the sights as he possibly could. They flew over bodies of water he didn’t quite recognize and a long stretch of unmarked flatland. Nothing was quite familiar; each karst looked vaguely alike, and the mountains he thought he recognized in the distance had changed shape from erosion and weathering.

His chest tightened when he knew for certain that they were approaching Minlin, and he felt strangely relieved when the dragon flew a wide berth north of Jueyan Karst. A knot of anxiety curdled in him when he thought of seeing his old family again. He wasn’t sure what to expect. He

wasn't sure what to say.

He wasn't sure if they would want him back.

Don't think about that.

The sky was roses and gold behind them and a beautiful pale blue ahead. Xiao could see what he now recognized as Mount Aozang, although it was slightly different from when he first explored it. It had been... domesticated.

There had always been a small lake at the top of the mountain, similar to the crane pond he had loved at Mount Hulao, but a little island had been newly formed in the center of the lake. As they approached, he could see several cloud-shaped stones that made a makeshift path to the island, where someone had planted a ginkgo tree and placed a stone table.

It was pleasant. It was cute. It felt almost *too* good, too clean and pure for someone like Xiao.

"This is the place in Liyue that I call home," Rex Lapis said. The words rumbled through his body, rippling the umber scales under Xiao's hands.

Xiao nodded slowly, adjusting to the newness of the mountain; of course, it couldn't have *actually* been new. It was only new to him.

He'd been gone for so long.

Rex Lapis seemed to sense his confusion. "Did you think I would live in a castle, or a private domain, like the other archons you knew?" He asked Xiao gently, keeping his voice even as he landed on the northern point of the mountain.

Xiao slid off his back, and Rex Lapis returned to his human form. "I did not know what to expect."

"That's fair." The archon laughed, and it was a happy sound. "I don't think I need a castle for any reason. Immortals like us do not need sleep or storage; at the most, we get rest and silence out of a building. At the least, it just takes up space and time. I can't see the appeal of having an expansive castle when home is a feeling, not a place."

"That's because you're a freeloader!"

Xiao jolted at the sound of a woman's voice, coming from seemingly everywhere and nowhere at the same time. He looked to Rex Lapis in concern. Was this an enemy? Would he have to fight?

"I'm not a freeloader!" Rex Lapis protested. He didn't sound worried at all.

The dust around their feet swirled upwards, joining together to create the form of a lovely young archon with long silver hair and a lilac hanfu. She wasn't carrying any weapons, and Xiao couldn't sense very much power in her, but he held himself in a ready position regardless.

She didn't seem fazed by him. "If you're not a freeloader, why do you call *my* mountain home?"

Rex Lapis pouted, and Xiao blinked in surprise. "I will not be taking personal questions at this time."

The young lady gave Xiao a wink. Her eyes nearly disappeared when she smiled, mischievous and twinkly and a very, very warm russet color. Xiao was reminded of ground spices, and he suddenly felt a little less uncomfortable. "He's avoiding the question because he knows I'm right."

Xiao exhaled, relaxing a little.

Rex Lapis scoffed through his nose. “Xiao, this is the Archon of Dust, Guizhong. Guizhong, this is Xiao. I found him in Kimaris’s domain. Is there anything we can do for him?”

“Xiao...” Guizhong’s eyes widened, moving from Xiao’s eyes to the mask at his hip. “You are a yaksha?”

Xiao instantly cast his eyes to Rex Lapis, who smiled. “You don’t need my permission to speak, Xiao. You can speak as you would like to. If you’d rather be silent, too, that will be okay.”

He bit his lip once, just once, before answering. “Yes. I am the Anemo yaksha.”

“Oh my archons,” Guizhong said softly.

She continued to look Xiao up and down, and he felt a little self-conscious. Her gaze wasn’t dirty or prying, but he pulled the black sleeves of his tunic into his fists all the same.

She seemed to realize that he was a little uncomfortable and instantly looked back at his face. “Do you want to cleanse yourself first?” She asked. “I think that can be first in the order of things, and I can make you new clothes in the meantime.”

Xiao couldn’t remember the last time he’d been able to submerge himself in water. He couldn’t even remember the last time he’d been able to clean himself at all. As an immortal yaksha, it didn’t really matter, but suddenly nothing in the world sounded better than a swim. “That would be wonderful.”

Rex Lapis nodded. “We will be atop the mountain peak if you need us. Nothing will hurt you here. This is a safe place. But for your peace of mind, we will not go too far away. Is that okay?”

The knot in Xiao’s chest loosened, at least a little. “Thank you.”

Even when the two of them disappeared over the peak, Xiao could still feel Rex Lapis’s immense power and aura engulfing the mountain. It was comforting, even for someone he had just met. Part of Xiao’s mind still told him to run — but he knew that he could trust the word of the Archon of Contracts.

He turned his attention towards the sparkling turquoise lake, rolled up his pant legs, stripped off his tunic, and dove into the water, taking up handfuls of sand to scrub his skin with.

The waters turned dark and gray and rusty from dust and half-healed burns and wounds, but more important to Xiao was the feeling of cleaning. He wasn’t just washing off dirt and blood; he was washing off years of darkness and loneliness, Osial and Zhui’s hands on his skin, and the fearful resignation to never being found; all these things swirled away, at least for a moment, with the sand that sank back to the bottom of the lake.

It was a long time before Xiao finally felt clean enough to stop. His skin tingled from the exfoliation, but the sting was satisfying. He floated on the surface of the water, taking shallow breaths, in and out, feeling the cool water and the warm sun. He loved the sun.

When Rex Lapis and Guizhong came down from the mountaintop a while later, they found Xiao sitting on a sun-warmed rock, his wet hair clinging to his shoulders and back, holding the black tunic that Zhui had given him.

Rex Lapis blinked at that. “Guizhong can make you new clothes, Xiao. You do not have to

continue wearing the garb you were forced to.” His words were careful, trying to reassure Xiao that he had a choice.

“It isn’t as though I need a reminder of what he did to me,” Xiao answered quietly. “But not every moment was always terrible. He gave me clothes, and food, and he took care of me after battles...” He shook his head. “I feel confused.”

There was silence for a moment.

“I think that it will be a process for you to relearn what it means to be treated well, and how it feels to be free.” Guizhong’s words were thoughtful, but confident. “But I think it’s the most important for you to understand right now, Xiao, that no matter what kind things he did for you every once in a while, he never should have done those terrible things to you.”

Rex Lapis seemed to have used the time to tell Guizhong all that had happened.

“I think that if you want to keep that changpao for now, it will not be the worst thing in the world, but I hope that you do not continue to think of it as a sign that Kimaris was ever good to you,” Guizhong finished. “I will make you new clothes regardless. The choice in the end is yours.”

He couldn’t think. Water from his hair dripped down his temple.

“You don’t have to make this decision now.” Rex Lapis took a step closer to Xiao. “You can put it in a box for now, maybe not think about it for a while, and allow yourself to heal a little more. In the future, when you have processed a little more, you can decide what you want to do with it.”

That would be good. “That would be good,” Xiao responded softly. “Thank you.”

Rex Lapis summoned a box from the air and opened it, allowing Xiao to place the changpao inside, before closing it and handing it back to the yaksha, who dematerialized it with a wave. “You are always welcome.”

Guizhong bounced on the balls of her feet, clearly trying not to let her impatience get the better of her. “Can I talk to him now, Rex? Please?”

Rex Lapis laughed, and Xiao almost smiled at her enthusiasm. “You can talk to me,” he said, voice a little more secure.

“You have a tattoo!” Guizhong knelt on the rock and reached out to touch the green marks on his right arm —

He flinched and reflexively dashed away, appearing a couple of meters away, eyes wide with caution.

The archon pulled her hand back, quickly. “I am sorry.” She pressed her lips together. “I am sorry, I wasn’t thinking. I will rein it in.”

Xiao exhaled shakily. “It’s okay.” *These archons are not your enemies. There is enough air to breathe.* “It’s okay.” He lowered himself back down to sit on the rock and pulled his knees close to his chest before sliding his hair away from his shoulder, revealing the length of the marks. “I think I was born with it, so I don’t know that you could technically call it a tattoo.”

“What is it?” She moved closer to examine it, but did not try to touch him.

He exhaled again. “It’s an illuminated beast, to represent another form. I know that as a yaksha, I

have a nonhuman form. But I don't know how to achieve it, and truthfully, right now I do not care to know it."

"It's beautiful," she admired.

Xiao's eyes twitched at the phrase, but he nodded. "Thank you."

She grinned. "Do you mind if I design you something that will showcase it? I think that as a yaksha, this is something that defines you, and it deserves to be seen. Just like you do."

He had never not had sleeves before. The idea of not having them was strange, to say the least.

But Rex Lapis did not have sleeves, and Rex Lapis was one of the strongest beings in Teyvat.

"I don't mind," Xiao responded, and was glad to find that he meant it.

"Okay, perfect!" Guizhong smiled. Her gaze fell on Xiao's hands. "Yaksha don't scar... How did this happen?"

Without actually making contact, Guizhong traced the bands of scar tissue around Xiao's wrists.

Rex Lapis spoke up. "I have a theory about that," he said. "I think that over extensive periods of time, the regeneration of an archon depends on the circumstances of the regeneration. So if he was always healing around the irons, it's possible for him to scar."

Xiao was quiet. He hadn't actually noticed those bands before.

"It's the same concept here," Guizhong said quickly. "If you want to cover them up, I will understand. And if you choose to be open, I will support you. It's really up to you."

"I used to carry my Vision on my wrist," Xiao thought aloud, quietly, just above a whisper. "But when he started chaining my wrists, I started carrying it on my belt instead."

Guizhong nodded. "Where would you *like* to carry it?"

"I would like to carry it on my wrist." Xiao reached for the Vision hanging on his rope belt. "It isn't actually a Vision in the way that the humans understand. I don't need a Vision like they do in order to have elemental power. I wasn't granted this Vision by the Anemo archon, and I'm actually fairly certain it's just a glass square, but I have to carry it to indicate that I'm an Anemo user." He turned the gold and glass over, and the Anemo symbol gleamed. Visions were works of intricate art, and it felt right to have his so within reach. He rubbed the glass with his thumb. "But I don't... I don't necessarily want to feel this."

The golden thread of the Vision pulled on his scars. He shook his head, clearing the memory of wire-sharp karma and the smell of blood.

"I can give you gauntlets," Guizhong offered, "and attach the thread to one of them. You won't have to feel it."

He nodded. The glass was warm under his thumb. "That would be good."

"I'm glad!" Enthusiasm crept back into Guizhong's voice. She summoned a pad of paper and began scribbling wildly on it with a stylus.

Rex Lapis reached out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind Guizhong's ear. He was smiling slightly, and his amber eyes were fond.

Xiao tilted his head and blinked. The suddenness of the motion and the seeming randomness of the timing was unprompted by Guizhong and almost, in Xiao's mind, uncalled for from Rex Lapis. He drew his eyebrows together, waiting for her to flinch or recoil from him.

But Guizhong leaned into Rex Lapis's hand, not taking her eyes off of the paper in front of her, sketching while also acknowledging and accepting his touch.

"I know that look, Guizhong," Rex Lapis said, teasing just a little. "Remember, you said you would rein it in. Be practical, okay?"

"I know what I'm doing, Rex," Guizhong replied, barely giving him a look. "I'll be practical."

He smiled deeper, moving around behind the goddess, resting his hands on her shoulders and his chin on the top of her head.

The contact was intimate and familiar, but not in any way that Xiao had actually experienced before. He could vaguely remember the feeling of familial care, and the physical desires of those whose dreams he'd eaten, but this kind of easy intimacy was new.

Romance, he thought, putting a word to the feeling. This was romance.

He looked away, back out at the landscape that he remembered but no longer knew, tucking his knees under his chin and wrapping his arms tightly around his legs.

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Less than an hour later, Guizhong had designed and created whole new clothes for Xiao, excitedly going over every part of it in detail.

"I wanted to make sure you have protection, but also freedom to move, and also... Aesthetic," She grinned. "I can sense your speed, and I wanted to match your Anemo aesthetic without being too bright. I don't think all-white or green will suit you now."

Xiao flexed his fingers, looking down at himself. His Vision hung from its thread around the black and teal gauntlet on his left hand, within easy access if he wanted to hold it. The white shirt had a high black collar and one long, red-lined sleeve and jade pauldron on the left arm, giving him coverage and motion while revealing the green yaksha markings on his right. Guizhong had designed him dark pants that fit loosely like his old ones and practical boots that did not weigh his feet down. Streamers tucked into his belt and flew behind him when he walked, and the silky-smooth breechcloth was decorated with abstract clouds. There was even a thin golden chain that wrapped around his waist for him to carry his mask from. He felt reborn, and comfortable, and *strange*.

"Is it too much jade?" Guizhong asked, a hint of nerves edging her words. "Or too much of anything? I hope it's not too much."

"It's not too much," Xiao answered quietly. It was too much. It was too much as in too much goodness, too much of the best things he'd ever owned, so much comfort that he felt wrong. "Thank you." The words seemed flat and not enough at all.

"It is truly my pleasure," Guizhong beamed. "Would you like to see?"

She procured a gilt full-length mirror from the dust and stood beside it for Xiao to look at.

He had never seen a mirror before.

Xiao had seen his reflection in passing, in calmer waterfalls or flat-topped lakes, but he had never seen himself so brightly or so vividly. His eyes popped a bit at the sight.

His reflection was jaw-dropping, with the streamers flowing out behind him and long, teal hair, almost turquoise in the sun, spilling down his back and framing his face. His skin was pale and clear and unmarred, and the bits of jade and gold in his new clothing only brought out the shine of his golden eyes.

It was nothing like how Xiao *wanted* to look. He hadn't wanted to be powerful or beautiful. He had the sudden, intrusive thought to smash the mirror and cut his own skin with the shards.

"Are you alright?" Guizhong asked, snapping Xiao away from his thoughts.

He hesitated to answer, biting his lip hard enough that he could almost taste blood.

"Xiao." Rex Lapis spoke, and Xiao met the archon's gaze. "*You have nothing to be afraid of.* What you see now is your authentic self. It will take time to get used to, but there is no need to fear it or despise it. You are strong, and it is not wrong for you to look the part."

He breathed in. He breathed out. "Thank you, my Lord," he said softly, and the words felt right.

He took another step closer to the mirror, looking more intentionally at his face. It wasn't smiling, and its gaze was very sharp — Xiao was reminded of a defensive cat — but it was striking and piercing, and he decided he liked this face. "Thank you, Lady Guizhong," he said to the goddess, who was grinning again with contentment.

"Just Guizhong is fine," she said cheerfully. "And you can call him Rex. He doesn't mind."

"That's not even my name." The archon rolled his eyes, but there was no heat behind the movement.

"You answer to anything I call you!" Guizhong dematerialized the mirror to dust, allowing it all to fall back to the ground. "One time, Xiao, I called him 'hey you,' and he turned around."

Xiao exhaled shortly out of his nose, the closest he had been to a laugh in years.

"There is still one more thing to address." Rex Lapis cleared his throat, ignoring Guizhong completely. "Did you carry a weapon before, and would you like to carry one again?"

Hm. Xiao summoned the ancient black tassel he'd used over the last decades, shifting uncomfortably at the thought of all the blood the polearm had seen. "I used to have a spear with a jade head that my m—" he corrected himself — "that... Kimaris took from me. I don't know what happened to it now."

"Ah." Rex Lapis scratched the side of his head. "If it was in his possession when he was executed, it is definitely no more. Was it important to you?"

Bonanus had given it to him. Xiao remembered. On the day that he turned one hundred years old, he had been gifted a jade-topped spear. The memory felt like a dream. "It's only a weapon."

Of course, Rex Lapis saw through him but did not press the matter. "I will make you a new one myself."

A spark of something, something like delight, sparked in Xiao's chest, so odd and foreign that he instantly squashed the emotion down. "Thank you."

“On to other matters, then,” Rex Lapis continued, casually enough that Xiao understood that the archon did not require his thanks. “I have notified the Yaksha of Jueyan Karst that the Anemo yaksha has been found.”

Xiao’s mind screeched to a grinding halt.

“The Electro yaksha, Bosacius, expressed interest in coming to see you and potentially bringing you back to live with them. However, I understand that there have been new yaksha in recent decades, and things won’t be the same as they were before.” His voice was calm and quiet, trying to balance the cacophony of thought inside Xiao’s head. “When he comes, I want you to remember that your life and the decisions you make are your own. No one controls you right now but you.”

What if they didn’t want him? Xiao’s heart raced. What if they didn’t recognize him? What if they saw how different he was and changed their minds about him? What if he was a burden? What if they had already moved on and coming back would just open old wounds? What should he even say?

“Xiao.” Guizhong spoke the name firmly. His vision cleared as he looked at her. “Everything will be okay. It really will be. But if home is too much for you to return to right now, you will always, always, *always* have a place here. Do you understand?”

He inhaled in, all the way to the bottom of his lungs, and exhaled out.

“Thank you,” he breathed. He had said thank you so many times that the words started to feel meaningless, but gratitude was all he had. “For saving me, for the clothes, and for this place. I owe you my everything.”

“Of course!” Guizhong said, genuinely kind, and Rex Lapis smiled.

When Xiao smiled back, he meant it.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading until the end ^^

- I characterized Guizhong myself and she is my interpretation and their relationship is my interpretation and don't be too sad

Source material: <https://genshin.mihoyo.com/en/news/detail/8642>

~Ya girl is on new medication~~~ and feeling FANTASTIC (literally tired all the time ___-)

I think I'm going to change my tentative upload schedule from every Saturday to every other Saturday.

Thank you to SunnyEli for motivating me to upload <3

Thank you all for your continued readership and I LOVE THIS STORY AND I HOPE YOU DO TOO!

New Beginning

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Xiao had been restless that whole morning.

Actually, he'd been restless the whole night before as well.

As the moon came up on his first night of freedom, Xiao had been walking all around Mount Aozang, looking out at everything, watching the trail of stars move, tapping his fingers, never once out of motion.

Part of it must have been overcompensation for years of not being able to move in the nights, but Xiao was sure that the majority of his restlessness came from nerves. He walked in circles atop the mountain for hours before Rex Lapis finally called him over to the stone table in the center of the lake.

"What is it that you are worried about?" Rex Lapis asked. He poured out some strong-smelling liquid from an earthenware teapot into a short cup, gesturing for Xiao to sit and pushing the cup towards him.

"So many things." Xiao answered very quietly. The white ceramic was hot through the fabric of his gloves.

"You can talk to me." Rex Lapis poured a cup out for himself. His dark hands were very steady, never shaking or spilling a drop, leaking soft light that illuminated the table.

What a marvel, Xiao thought, to have the privilege to sit down with Morax, the Archon of Liyue, and watch him blow the steam from his cup as if the heat of the tea could burn him. He looked down at the murky liquid in his own cup. "What tea is this?"

The god took a sip and smiled in contentment. "It's more of a tisane, but in Liyue it's called *zhenxin san*. It is meant to clear the mind from panic and help to ease emotional pain."

Xiao lifted the cup to his face, taking in the spicy scent. "What is in it?"

"Licorice, wild ginger, ginseng, and some other pharmaceutical herbs." A lilt of excitement crept into Rex Lapis's voice as he spoke. "You fry the leaves all together, add water in a ten to one-point-five ratio, boil for seven minutes, add cinnabar (but not so much that the average human would get sick), heat again with a little sweet flower for taste, and serve!" He smiled proudly. "Try it. I made it for you."

He made it for me.

Xiao took a sip. The flavor was deeper than anything he'd eaten in years and a little overwhelming, but the warmth flooded his senses and the sweetness spread across his tongue. He felt the mix wrap around the tightness in his chest as he breathed out, exhalation warm against the backs of his hands.

Rex Lapis leaned forward, lacing his fingers together on the table top. The soft golden light from his arms and eyes contrasted beautifully with the silver moonbeams filtering through the ginkgo leaves. "If Bosacius didn't love you, he wouldn't have asked to see you. You know that, don't

you?”

Xiao held the cup a little tighter. “What if he doesn’t recognize me? Or what if he sees what I’ve become and is afraid of me?” His mouth went dry, and he took another sip. “What does he know of me?”

The archon hummed in understanding. “Not too much. I thought that you should share with him as much as you chose to. But he knows that you had been kidnapped and forced to do terrible things, and that I do not find you guilty for any of those things, and that there is no risk of this happening again.”

“How do you know it won’t happen again?” Xiao dropped his voice to a deathly quiet. The tea lingered on his tongue, sweet and smooth, all of a sudden unbearably familiar. Even now, in the presence of his savior, he was craving dreams...

“Eh.”

Xiao blinked in surprise.

Rex Lapis took another casual sip of his tea. “I can see your heart, and I can see that it is good. I don’t have all the answers for you right now, but you will make an effort, and you will succeed.” He put the cup down and looked at the dregs at the bottom. “In Fontaine, the people practice tasseography, where they look at tea leaves and try to tell the future.” He swirled his cup around once and pushed it towards Xiao. “What do you see?”

Xiao peered at the dark sediment, piled in messy leaves with a loop on top. “It kind of looks like a basket.”

“Interesting,” Rex Lapis murmured. He gestured at Xiao’s cup. “Why don’t you try?”

It was probably a ploy to get Xiao to finish drinking the mixture, but the tea was comforting, and it couldn’t hurt. He took a deep breath and tipped back the last drops before swirling his cup the way Rex Lapis had.

The sediment didn’t look like anything in particular to Xiao, just like a circle, but Rex Lapis took one glance and nodded confidently. “That’s the sun. It’s supposed to represent new beginnings and success.” He looked back at Xiao. “Would it help you if I was present when Bosacius comes in the morning?”

Warmth from the tea as well as Rex Lapis’s words spread through Xiao’s soul. He smiled slightly and shook his head. “No, thank you. I think I will be okay.” He tapped his fingers on the table as Rex Lapis filled his cup again, swirling the sun pictograph back into the liquid. “What does the basket mean?”

Rex Lapis smiled, tilting his head and refilling his own cup. “An addition to a family.”

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Bosacius hadn’t changed at all.

His hair stuck out from his head just a little longer, and his arms were somehow a little bigger, and his face was just a little more tired, but the moment he saw his brother his eyes grew wide enough to see all of his scleras.

“Alatus,” he whispered.

Xiao tensed all the way from the top of his skull to the tips of his toes.

“Alatus, it’s really you!” Bosacius’s voice grew louder. His footsteps were heavy on the grass as he walked towards Xiao and swept him into a crushing bear hug with all four arms. “Oh my archons... Alatus, I’m so, so sorry...”

Xiao bit his lip. He couldn’t bring himself to speak. He couldn’t bring himself to hug Bosacius back. He took a couple of shallow breaths, swallowing hard, wishing in the back of his mind he had asked Rex Lapis to stay with him. “It’s not your fault,” he said into Bosacius’s ear, voice less sincere than he would have liked. His arms stayed resolutely at his sides, and he cleared his throat. “It’s not your fault,” he said again, a little louder.

Bosacius, still not seeming to sense Xiao’s discomfort, pulled away to hold him at arm’s distance, looking him up and down. “You look different,” he said softly.

Breathe. This is your brother. “It’s been a long time,” Xiao answered. He didn’t know what to say.

“Your hair...” Bosacius’s violently purple eyes traced the length of Xiao’s hair before resting again on his face. “Never mind that now. Alatus, *what happened to you?*”

His thick fingers were somehow simultaneously careful and also probing on Xiao’s arms. Xiao narrowed his eyes slightly; he could hear the caution in Bosacius’s voice, tinged with fear.

Of course Bosacius was afraid. He could sense the darkness, sense the karma, couldn’t he?

“What have you heard?” Xiao kept his voice flat and quiet, as non-threatening as he could.

Bosacius pressed his lips together. “That the last years have been hell for you. That you were alive this whole time, somewhere in Liyue that we couldn’t reach you, and I’m sorry, Alatus, I’m so sorry...” His eyes shimmered.

Xiao exhaled sharply through his nose. “Bo,” he whispered. “I don’t even know what year it is. I don’t even know how long it’s been. Everything is different and the same, and I’m not the same person I was, and I don’t know... I don’t know *anything*.” His hands curled into fists at his side and his eyes remained stubbornly dry.

Bosacius’s hands tightened on Xiao’s arms. “Alatus —”

“*Xiao*.” He interrupted, and Bosacius startled. “My name is Xiao.”

Bosacius looked stung. A strange feeling of irritation twitched under Xiao’s eye.

“Okay...” Bosacius said slowly. “Xiao... You’ve been gone for so long, and everyone wants to see you, to see that it’s really you. We have so much to talk about, so much to catch up on. Will you come back to Jueyan Karst with me? Please?” His voice broke on the words, and a couple of purple sparks jumped off his hands. “They need to know. They need to know that you’re alive, that you’re okay. Please come back with me.”

Xiao turned his head away, looking up towards the peak of the mountain. “There’s new yakshas I don’t even know anymore.”

“Yes. And they’ve heard all about you,” Bosacius said firmly. “Don’t think that we forgot you. How could we?” He turned to place himself in Xiao’s line of vision again. “Think of Indarias. Please.”

Guilt cut through Xiao's heart, and he met Bosacius's gaze again.

"Indarias never gave up." Electricity flashed in his purple eyes. "Even when we were told you had to be dead, she never stopped looking for you. She cried every night for years. When Rex Lapis told me that you were back, she fainted. Yaksha don't faint." He squeezed his eyes shut. "Please come home."

"Why didn't she come?" Xiao whispered. "Why did you come alone, then?"

Bosacius sighed, long and heavy and defeated. "I... don't think that she would have been able to handle it in the slim chance that it wasn't you."

They had missed him. They had looked for him. They wanted him back.

But they didn't know what he had been through.

They were expecting Alatus, the sweet Anemo yaksha with the beautiful laugh and gentle spirit.

What they would get was Xiao. A monster. A bloodstained dream addict. An unsmiling, scarred, broken killer.

"I don't know if I'm ready yet."

Bosacius's hands were still on Xiao's arms. "I can't go back alone. I don't know what to tell them if I go back alone. I don't think they could handle sensing just one presence. Come back with me." His voice grew quiet. "Don't make them hold onto this heartbreak any longer."

Xiao's skin prickled with unease, like he had done something wrong. Like he was waiting for or expecting some kind of punishment. He was suddenly extremely aware of the thin mountain air and the slight sounds of ringing in his ears.

This was his brother in front of him. He was safe. He was away from those that wanted to hurt him and in the hands of someone who loved him.

So why did he feel like he needed to run from a threat?

"Xiao."

He turned at the sound of Rex Lapis's voice, exhaling a breath he didn't know he'd been holding.

Bosacius released his hold on Xiao, taking a few steps backwards. "My lord Morax," he stammered, bowing a little awkwardly. "It's an honor."

Rex Lapis nodded once, standing where he'd suddenly appeared just a few meters away. "It is good to see you again, Electro Yaksha Bosacius." He turned back towards Xiao. His dark arms were folded, and his expression was neutral. "Xiao, do you want to return to Jueyan Karst, if even just for a moment?" He inclined his head slightly. "If you do, I will accompany you. I would like to speak to the other yakshas as well. If not, I will still go with Bosacius, and you can stay here."

Bosacius's jaw dropped, but Rex Lapis did not acknowledge him.

Breathe in, breathe out.

He wanted to see Indarias. He didn't want to cause her any more pain. He wanted to see the waterfall he used to know so well. He wanted to make sure for himself that Bonanus and Menogias still remembered him. He wanted to see if they had changed.

He wanted to see the new yakshas.

“I would like to go,” he murmured softly. “Thank you for your company.”

He could hear Bosacius sigh in relief. Rex Lapis made a soft sound of approval, and the explosions in the pit of Xiao’s chest started to subside.

But even as they deployed their gliders towards Jueyan Karst, the line of concern between Xiao’s eyebrows stayed persistently in place.

Chapter End Notes

We do be moving slowly but hoooo I promise it will pick up!

Happy early chapter, and I will post next week Saturday to atone for the short chapter
<3 let's meet some baby yakshas.

Also if you would like to interact with me on Twitter you can find me here:
https://twitter.com/indertia_

To This We Dedicate Our Lives

Chapter Summary

Xiao hadn't known what to expect from this reunion. Perhaps he should have expected and braced himself to be touched. Maybe he should have prepared answers to all the questions that he thought they would ask. All he'd done for the past day was wonder about what could happen without actually giving any solutions and now he was standing here with everyone's eyes on him looking like an idiot.

His head swam. "I thought about you all the time," he breathed. He couldn't look anyone in the eye. "I needed you." The flash of irritation, the pressure of being here in Jueyan Karst, and the strange, jealous feeling he had for the new yakshas — every terrified emotion he'd felt in the last day pierced Xiao's heart like his own spear had struck him, manifesting in one quiet, strangled sentence that he hissed from between his teeth. *"I needed you, and you didn't find me."*

Chapter Notes

Important Note: I changed the tags a lot to basically include everything I think is important to the story right now, as far as I can think ahead, up until the end (which I don't know when it will end), even including spoilers like Endgame Lumine/Xiao. I used to add them as they happened but I suppose it's better to just tag everything so you guys can decide if it's worth your time since it will go on for a long, long time.

Endgame Lumine/Xiao, background Ganyu/Xiao, but *the entire way*, I don't consider this a romance. This is purely a story about Xiao and his character. There might be romantic *parts* in the process of the journey. Maybe you'll love them and maybe you won't; the reality is that's your decision. But I hope my writing speaks for itself! :)

Happy early chapter ~

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Indarias was a blue blur that screamed when she saw him, sprinting full speed at him, pushing Bosacius out of the way and throwing her arms around him. If Rex Lapis hadn't been right next to him, Xiao would have bolted away out of pure instinct.

"Alatus," she was crying. Her tears were wet against his shoulder. "Alatus, you're alive, thank Morax and all archons above and below..." She babbled a little, squeezing him tighter, crushing the air out of his lungs —

He dashed, wrenching out of her hold, eyes wide, hand twitching for his spear. He barely had the sense not to summon it.

The other yaksha shouted in surprise, thrown off from the sudden movement, and Bosacius caught Indarias as she fell backwards from the force. Her face was twisted in confusion and hurt, but Xiao

was very focused on controlling his own slightly panicked breathing. Indarias looks exactly the same, nothing about her has changed, obviously she still loves you, *so why are you running away from her?*

Bosacius was talking lowly to Indarias. He said Xiao's name at some point, and the air trembled with the soundwaves. Xiao closed his eyes, head spinning from the overstimulation. The karst had deepened, and the waterfall had thinned, and the glow from the morning sun through his eyelids reminded him of karma, and the feeling of anyone touching him was too much to handle.

Breathe.

He opened his eyes and willed himself to focus on the present.

"I'm sorry." Indarias pulled herself together, even as tears were spilling incessantly from her eyes. "It's just... I'm so, so glad you're alive." Her hands were shaking, but she clenched them tightly, as if resisting the urge to reach out and touch him again. Her lips formed the name again. *Alatus*.

The other yaksha were all staring at him intently. Their faces were pinched and slightly concerned. Menogias's mouth was open like she wanted to say something, and Bonanus's eyes were wide and afraid.

Of course they were afraid.

"My lord Morax," Bosacius was saying quickly to Rex Lapis. "Forgive us for our unpreparedness and discourtesy. It has been a very emotional time."

Rex Lapis waved his hand dismissively. "Think nothing of it. I understand."

Xiao exhaled and straightened, rubbing his arm where Indarias had touched him. He was okay. This was his family.

"So..." Rex Lapis gestured around. "I believe some introductions are necessary? Bosacius?"

"Yes! Yes, of course." Bosacius scrambled, making sure Indarias was steady on her feet before lurching over to the other yaksha. "This is the Anemo yaksha, *Xiao*. He is finally home, so please address him as such."

Xiao didn't miss the glance that Bosacius shot at Menogias and Bonanus, as if checking to see their reactions.

"Um." The timid-looking young Geo yaksha waved awkwardly at Xiao. "Hi. Xiao. Sir. Um. I'm Pervases." He scratched his dark hair. "It's nice to meet you."

"I'm Antheas." The Cryo yaksha interjected, waving a little more confidently. Her icy platinum hair was braided loosely over one shoulder and adorned with very small glittering snowflakes. "We have heard a lot about you."

The Dendro yaksha had mossy green hair that fell over one heavy-lidded eye. He inclined his head once. "Hello. I'm Somnius."

Somnius. Sleep. Dreams.

Don't think about that.

Xiao nodded sharply in acknowledgment.

They were not stronger than he was; he could tell just by sensing their power. They were not even stronger than the other yaksha, which was odd. He knit his eyebrows. What was the point of them, then? It was true that all they had to fight off generally would be hilichurls and the occasional possessed plant — but were the original yaksha really granted such weak new members?

Menogias had drawn closer. Xiao could feel the warmth of her always-active Pyro energy from the closing distance. He vaguely registered that she had grown her hair longer and pierced her ears since he'd last seen her. "Alatus," she said softly, voice controlled and careful.

Xiao's eyes twitched.

"You look good." She took in his hair and his new clothes, so different from the simple garb he had initially appeared in. "What happened to you, my brother?"

He could feel everyone's eyes on him, and he wanted to disappear. He inhaled, trying to make as little motion as possible, as if that would keep the attention off of him. "If it's okay, I don't really want to talk about that."

"Oh?" Bonanus spoke for the first time. "As good as it is to see you again..." He hesitated for a moment before continuing, his deep voice frying with every inflection. "We really thought you were gone, and now you're just back, and, really, Alatus, you can't just push Indarias and then expect us not to wonder where you have been!"

Xiao hadn't known what to expect from this reunion. Perhaps he should have expected and braced himself to be touched. Maybe he should have prepared answers to all the questions that he thought they would ask. All he'd done for the past day was wonder about what could happen without actually giving any solutions and now he was standing here with everyone's eyes on him looking like an idiot.

"Bonanus!" Bosacius didn't quite shout at his fellow yaksha, but it was close enough that Indarias let out a small sob. "You don't know what he's been through. You don't know what he's had to do or deal with for the last *two hundred years*. Can you give him a moment to adjust?"

He'd been gone two hundred years.

Xiao's head swam. "I thought about you all the time," he breathed. He couldn't look anyone in the eye. "I needed you." The flash of irritation, the pressure of being here in Jueyan Karst, and the strange, jealous feeling he had for the new yakshas — every terrified emotion he'd felt in the last day pierced Xiao's heart like his own spear had struck him, manifesting in one quiet, strangled sentence that he hissed from between his teeth. "*I needed you, and you didn't find me.*"

The air went cold.

Tears were still flooding endlessly from Indarias's blue eyes. "Alatus," she sobbed, and he closed his eyes. "I never gave up on you. I never stopped looking for you. *Please.*" She broke away from Bosacius, stumbling almost blindly towards Xiao, grabbing his wrists in her hands and sinking to her knees before him. "I was supposed to protect you, and I *failed*, and I'm sorry, Alatus, *please believe me!*"

Her hands were cold through his gauntlets.

"We looked for decades, Alatus, and we *prayed*, and if even Morax didn't know where to find you, then how the fuck could we have known?" Menogias, who'd been so careful just a moment ago, sounded on the edge of tears herself. "We prayed for help, and the archons gave us more eyes, and

we prayed for your return, and we did the best we could.”

“We all did the best we could,” Pervases mumbled, clearly trying to be helpful.

Indarias was still shaking, hands closed over Xiao’s clenched fists.

This is your family. This is your family. He told himself this one fact over and over. *They’re not trying to hurt you. They looked for you. There is enough air here for you to breathe. Breathe.* “I believe you,” he murmured. “I forgive you. I’m safe now.”

The words were more for himself than for anyone else.

Indarias finally inhaled deeply, her breathing starting to steady out, even as she didn’t look up.

Bonanus, looking a little bit more reserved, cleared his throat awkwardly. He had never been good at acknowledging when he had been out of line. “You’re home now,” he said gruffly. “And things can go back to the way they were before, right?” His golden-brown eyes looked down at Indarias’s back. “Just like old times.” He offered Xiao a halfhearted grin. “Everything is going to be okay.”

Xiao wasn’t so sure about that.

He knew that gold would gather under a certain rock beside the waterfall. He knew that cranes loved the pond on Mount Hulao. He knew that Menogias had once tried to befriend a Pyro whopperflower, insisting that their “hair” was too alike for her to kill it. He knew that Bosacius had always wanted to cook but was too lazy to really learn how. He knew that Indarias loved to read and chew on Qingxin flowers. He knew that Bonanus was afraid of needles.

None of that seemed like information that mattered now. The yaksha were his family. He was supposed to belong with them. But the eyes on him, the new depth of the karst, and unfamiliar formations of eroded mountains around them, and the cold hands on his wrists were suddenly overwhelming.

He twisted his wrists, trying to shake Indarias without pushing her like he had before; she lifted her head, but dropped her hands to wrap around his fingers.

It was slightly better.

“Thank you, Lord Morax, for bringing him back to us,” Bosacius was saying to the archon, who had been all but forgotten. He seemed to be trying to turn the atmosphere back towards normalcy. “We cannot thank you enough. Is there anything we can do in return?”

Xiao turned towards Rex Lapis, relieved to have something other than Indarias’s still-crying figure to focus on.

Rex Lapis pursed his lips thoughtfully. He looked at Xiao and spoke very pointedly. “Before I say these next words, I want you to know that even before you were found, I had it in mind to offer the yakshas this contract. You are free. You would have been free. And you are free to do whatever *you* would like to do. Do you understand?”

He is telling you that you are not a bargaining chip. Xiao nodded.

“Good.” Rex Lapis turned back towards the rest of the yaksha and spoke without introduction. “As you all well know, the archons of Liyue are currently at war over the Seat of the Seven. It is not a losing battle, but there are some other issues that must be handled if the war is to continue in the right direction.” He spread his hands out in front of him. “I know that the yaksha are mighty

warriors, exceptionally effective against those of demonic nature. As you know, when a god's physical form is destroyed, their will and power live on. The remnants and wraths manifest as demons and cause chaos. Over the course of this war, someone has to keep these remnants at bay." He looked at each yaksha for a moment. "I offer you the status and power of adepti in exchange for this purge of evil. The best way that you could thank me is by agreeing to this contract."

The yakshas gasped.

Adepti. Becoming adepti meant grandeur, worship from the people of Liyue, and divine energy that would boost their strength and grant them the ability to open pocket dimensions and domains. Short of being an archon, the title of "adeptus" was the highest honor for a Liyuen.

Still, having experience with the absolute ravage of karma was enough to make Xiao hesitate. Killing more demons meant taking more karma. Constant demons with increasing power, such as the remnants of gods, would continuously heap karma on their souls, adding exponentially until life was worse than death. Xiao bit his lip, momentarily forgetting Indarias's cold hands in his...

"We will do it!" Bosacius, Menogias, and the younger yakshas spoke almost all at the same time, excited beyond belief.

Rex Lapis blinked. "You don't require time to think about it?" He asked. "It is not a matter to be taken lightly. The job is nearly thankless, and the demons will only increase in numbers."

"Of course we will pledge to protect Liyue, and to protect you." Bosacius was sure. "You brought Xiao back to us, and you deserve to be in the Seat of the Seven more than any other archon alive. It would be an honor to fight for you." He looked around at the other yaksha, reaching for Indarias's shoulder. "I agree to the stipulations of this contract."

Blood roared in Xiao's ears. Each of the other yaksha was signing into this contract, verbally agreeing to the adeptus status, the red lines of divinity appearing under and around their eyes. They had no idea what they were getting into — likely, even Rex Lapis did not know exactly what it was he was asking from them.

Indarias was still holding his hand when she finally lifted her head, pulled herself to her feet, and spoke. "Thank you for bringing my Alatus back to me," she said to Rex Lapis, voice haggard from crying. "I agree to the stipulations of this contract."

Xiao's heart twisted. He would have thought he would be used to the feeling by now.

The thing was, becoming an adeptus made sense. It really did make sense. In the end, he would be spending his life by Rex Lapis's side, surrounded by his family, doing the one thing that he was good at, fighting for a cause that he believed in, taking on the karma that he'd been trained to handle for two centuries. He could be the perfect tool, the perfect weapon, this time of his own choosing.

"I agree to the stipulations of this contract." The words left his mouth easily, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Rex Lapis raised his eyebrows. "You too, Xiao?"

Xiao nodded. For the first time that day, he didn't feel anxious at all. He could feel the eyes of all the yakshas on him and the pressure of Indarias's hand clutching his, but he stood up a little straighter. "Yes, my lord. I want to serve. I want to be useful for you. I want to repay you for what you have done for me." He turned towards Rex Lapis, dropping to one knee and bowing his head.

“To purge evil through battle with my fellow yakshas, for the purpose of furthering your goals... To this, I dedicate my life.”

He could feel burning around his eyes and the light of divine power filling him as the other yakshas followed his example suit. “To this,” their voices rumbled, “we dedicate our lives.”

“My adepti.” Rex Lapis smiled. “Thank you for your contract.”

Indarias’s hand was warm, and Xiao felt the ice between him and the other yakshas start to break with their newly common futures.

◇ ◇ ◇

The intensity of their reunion couldn’t have peaked any higher than an eternal contract with the Archon of Liyue.

So naturally, in character with the calm-yet-assertive nature of the god, he procured a pot of mint tea and insisted that everyone sit down for a cup. “Nothing cannot be made better by a cup of tea,” he’d said before sitting between Bosacius and Bonanus to talk more about adepti powers.

Xiao sat on the grass, passively listening while Menogias, Antheas, Somnius, and Pervases talked about what the yakshas had been up to for the last decades. They talked about exploring all of Liyue during their search for him and the people that they had met (“We found an abandoned castle by Qingxu that’s mostly inhabited by lawachurls. Insane.”), the beings they’d come across (“First impression of Morax? Don’t say anything but... He’s *hot*.”), where they were when they learned that Decarabian had fallen (“Yea, we’re not getting into that.”), and their thoughts on the new god Barbatos (“Wasn’t he a fairy?”); anything and everything positive that they could think of to say, they said it, and Xiao appreciated it. The constant flow of voices and good memories was relaxing, and it was nice to drown out the anxieties in his own head for a while.

The morning turned into afternoon and afternoon into evening, and the excitement of the day waned into a more-or-less comfortable lull. Eventually the conversation turned to new topics, such as how each yaksha planned to design his or her individual domains and speculations about the other adepti, and Xiao started to tune out, turning his attention towards the sky above him. Somehow, amazingly, he could still remember the names of the stars and trace the constellations.

Indarias had not let go of his hand the entire time. She had not spoken either, despite having been present for all of the past events. She mostly just stared at the ground by their feet, fingers wrapped around his palm, not quite listening and not quite thinking either. Her eyes were puffy, and the new red divinity lines around them only served to make her look more exhausted than she already did.

He couldn’t quite tell what she was thinking.

He couldn’t quite bring himself to apologize for pushing her earlier, either.

He didn’t really know what to say.

“Will you stay with us tonight?”

Xiao startled. Indarias had whispered, as if she was afraid that if she spoke too loud, he would disappear.

He looked around. The new yaksha were nice. Jueyan Karst seems less intimidating now that he saw it again. Menogias and Bosacius, at the very least, were very receptive to his return.

“I don’t think I’m ready.” He didn’t want to be alone. But he didn’t want to be here.

He braced himself for Indarias to protest, or to scream at him for not loving them enough, or to forbid him to leave her again.

She let out a shaky breath. “Okay.”

Xiao drew his knees to his chest, wrapping his free arm around them. Some of the tension left his spine. “Thank you,” he whispered back.

Indarias finally released his hand, and reached out hesitantly towards him. Her voice never raised above a breath. “Will you...” Her hand hovered in the air. “Will you let me cut your hair?”

Tingles flooded Xiao’s skin and he exhaled deeply, expelling thoughts of Zhui, of Osial, of all of the terrible memories and experiences that he had.

He could remember every time someone had touched his hair, everything it had signified as he looked more and more like his old master, and how it had been a shield for him to hide behind when he needed it.

His time with Zhui was over and gone.

New clothes. New family. New environment. New life.

“Yes.”

Indarias moved around him. He tried not to flinch as she summoned a short blade and lifted the hair away from his neck. His head felt lighter with every *shhk, shhk* of teal hair that fell to the grass behind him. Weight lifted off of his shoulders.

“Thank you.” Indarias whispered between cuts. “Thank you for coming back home to me. I’m so sorry I couldn’t protect you.” She cut the last few strands, and he could feel her hands shaking. “I’m sorry.” She rested her hands on his shoulders, slowly, carefully, like he would break if she was too harsh. “Please stay. Please don’t leave me again.”

The words were barely audible.

Xiao hung his head forward. Indarias had left two strands longer at the front, the way she always had in the past, long enough that he could narrow his field of vision to avoid overstimulation. She brushed her fingers through the hair on the back of his head, pulling very gently outwards to style it in the way that he had liked. It was familiar, reminiscent of an easier time.

“I really can’t.” He pressed his lips together tightly. “I’m sorry.” He turned to look at her, and her hand fell back to her side. “But... I will come back.”

I promise, he wanted to say.

But he didn’t.

“Okay.” Indarias closed her eyes. “I will be right here.”

He hugged his knees closer to his chest and summoned a small blast of Anemo energy, blowing the discarded teal strands around him into the wind.

Bless~ the road to healing is a long one.

But he's on the way :)

I'm on Twitter if ya'll wanna chill @indertia_

This Could Be Home

Chapter Summary

“If you were alone here, at the place that we consider ‘home,’ would you feel as comfortable?” Indarias had asked him. “It would feel strange, wouldn’t it? This familiar place would be too quiet, too empty, too ghostly. Jueyan Karst is not what you need to make a place feel like home. The people — Bonanus, Bosacius, Menogias, and the two of us — we are what make a home. It doesn’t matter where we are; Jueyan Karst, or Minlin, or even Khaen’riah. If we are together, we are home.”

Rex Lapis and Guizhong absolutely did create a feeling of home for Xiao. They gave him his space, but never went too far as to leave him feeling alone, and whenever one had to attend to some business away, they always let him know beforehand. The next few days went slowly, but Xiao relished in the slowness, taking in as much of the sky and air as he could, savoring the feeling of “home” that he had missed during the reunion at Jueyan Karst.

It was insane how quickly that feeling could go away, he thought dully as adepts flooded the center of the mountain peak.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

“Home is not the place. It’s the people.”

Indarias had once told Xiao this, a long, long, time ago, after the Anemo yaksha had wondered aloud about the purpose of calling Jueyan Karst “home.”

“If you were alone here, at the place that we consider ‘home,’ would you feel as comfortable?” Indarias had asked him. “It would feel strange, wouldn’t it? This familiar place would be too quiet, too empty, too ghostly. Jueyan Karst is not what you need to make a place feel like home. The *people* — Bonanus, Bosacius, Menogias, and the two of us — *we* are what make a home. It doesn’t matter where we are; Jueyan Karst, or Minlin, or even Khaen’riah. If we are together, we are home.”

Xiao had thought about this a lot over the last years. In all the time that he had spent at the blackstone castle, he had never once thought of it as “home.” His old master had not exactly fostered a “homey” kind of atmosphere.

He was deeply relieved to find a stark contrast in Mount Aocang with Rex Lapis and Guizhong, who absolutely did create a feeling of home for Xiao. They gave him his space, but never went too far as to leave him feeling alone, and whenever one had to attend to some business away, they always let him know beforehand. The next few days went slowly, but Xiao relished in the slowness, taking in as much of the sky and air as he could, savoring the feeling of “home” that he had missed during the reunion at Jueyan Karst.

It was insane how quickly that feeling could go away, he thought dully as adepts flooded the center of the mountain peak.

Rex Lapis had called for a meeting of the available adepti, if only to introduce the yakshas as new adepti and manage expectations. “They’ll be happy about it, I’m sure!” Guizhong had assured Xiao after fawning over how much his haircut and the new red lines on his eyes suited him. “They trust Rex to make good decisions. And honestly, with the way the war is going right now, they’ll be happy to have the help.”

The yaksha had not shown yet. Xiao looked around from his usual perch at the edge of the peak, seated with his arms wrapped around his knees, observing the other adepti. From what he knew about adepti, they usually took the shape of animals so as to not be mistaken for anything other than the powerful figures they were. No humans would question a speaking, glowing animal the way they might brush off an average-looking, Vision-wielding human. He noted two stags and two tall cranes, one of which was seated at the stone table with Guizhong.

The other two figures maintained human appearances. One stood off to the side, much like Xiao himself was doing, but she stood perfectly straight and tall, mouth set in a soft line. Her right arm rested at her side, and her left arm ended in a stump just above where her elbow would have been. Her face was crossed with scars, the largest of them cutting through her left eye, giving her an intimidating look, as if the waves of Geo power rolling off of her shoulders weren’t enough to make Xiao cautious. Clearly, this woman — this *archon* — had fought something terrible enough to scar her, and still been strong enough to come out the other end of the battle alive.

He cast his eyes away.

He tilted his head in wonder when his gaze fell on the last figure, who was conversing with Rex Lapis. Xiao could sense the half-human, half-qilin blood in her. A majestic pair of red horns adorned her head, standing out strikingly from her flowing, pale blue hair, and her aura was gentle and sweet. A Cryo Vision sat in the curve of her hip in a decorative knot of red kumihimo cords, and she was twisting the ends of the cords together mindlessly out of habit. He couldn’t feel overwhelming power in her, so she couldn’t have been an archon, but something about the way she held herself with simultaneous confidence and delicate nervousness captivated his attention.

Interest stirred in Xiao’s chest.

He smashed it down.

“Xiao!”

He turned at the sound of Bosacius’s voice, grateful for the distraction. The seven other yaksha closed their gliders, landing on the rock behind him. “Hello.” *Make an effort.* “How was the ride?” *You awkward fuck.*

“It was good,” Indarias said softly, taking a seat next to him, close enough that he could feel her Hydro energy refreshing his sun-warmed skin. “It’s a beautiful day.”

“It was fine!” Pervases’ hair was even more messed up and wind-rumpled than usual. “Look what Lady Guizhong made for us the other day!” He turned to show Xiao his mask at his side, hanging from a fine gold chain. “She came to tell us about what happens if we lose it, and told us these chains can’t be broken by any weapon. Isn’t that cool?” He gave the mask a testing tug, grinning when it held fast.

Thank you, Guizhong, for telling them so that I didn’t have to, Xiao prayed silently. He nodded at Pervases, feeling suddenly tired. “Yes.”

“Bosacius pierced Somnius’s ear,” Antheas informed him. “He wanted an earring like Rex Lapis.

And that's all we did this week because he wouldn't shut up about it."

Xiao almost cracked a smile. It was actually refreshing to have the younger yakshas, who had not known him beforehand and did not hold back or feel awkward when talking to him. "Why?"

Somnius shrugged. "I just *felt* like it. It's cool."

Menogias patted Somnius's shoulder. "Rex Lapis wears it better, if you ask me."

"I think so too," Somnius said blankly. "Did I ever say I think I look better than him?"

The other yakshas laughed, finally starting to warm up. "Have you ever thought about wearing earrings, Xiao?" Bosacius asked him.

Xiao cringed.

At one point or another, Zhui had pierced Xiao's ears, "just to see what it looks like." He'd done it with the tip of his sword, and Xiao had not responded well to having the blade that close to his face. Zhui had eventually allowed him to heal, saying that his hair covered his ears anyway, but the memory of his pain and embarrassment had remained.

Don't think about that right now.

"They're a symbol of commitment, or ownership." Xiao kept his voice steady, even as every cell in his body rose to a high, anxious alert. Indarias was too close. There were too many people behind him. There were too many strangers in front of him. "If Rex Lapis asked me to, I might consider it. But no. I don't want them."

He was met with quiet.

It might have been the wrong thing to say, in light of the context. Somnius had just pierced his own ear, and Indarias and Menogias and Antheas had earrings, and the vibe just then had been so positive and *why did he have to mess it up by talking don't talk—*

"That's okay," Menogias grinned, throwing her arm around Somnius's neck and pulling him down to her height. "Anyone who'd heard Somnius screeching when Bosacius showed him the needle wouldn't want to get their ears pierced anyway."

"Hey!" Somnius complained, and the other yakshas laughed again.

Even Indarias, who'd been mostly composed since arriving, smiled indulgently. "Menogias, be kind!"

Xiao relaxed a little, calming his pounding heart. This was his family.

"Are we ever going to go meet those other adepti?" Bonanus asked, his voice just a touch below booming. Xiao could tell he was a bit intimidated by the two stags and the three Geo archons before them. "That's what we're here for, isn't it?"

Pervases jumped off of the rock, sending a small burst of Geo energy rippling into the ground. "Yes, let's go!" He cheered, barrelling forward like a child. "I'll race you, Bosacius!"

"I would not charge towards a group of adepti if I were you!" Bosacius warned, still grinning back and running after the younger yaksha. The others followed amidst little whoops of excitement, not unlike children themselves.

Xiao remained seated on the rock. Indarias, who'd stopped just a few feet in front of him, turned back towards him, cautious, still smiling gently. "Are you okay, darling?"

He nodded once. "Yes."

He stood up.

He moved forward.

◇ ◇ ◇

Guizhong called Xiao over almost immediately, introducing the white crane as Cloud Retainer, confirming that she was indeed the friend that often assisted Guizhong with designs and combat builds. "This is Xiao, the Anemo yaksha. He's been staying with Rex and I for the time being."

Speaking to a crane was slightly unnerving. "Hello."

The crane did not speak directly to him. "One approves of the clothing you have made for the Anemo yaksha."

"Thanks, Cloudy," Guizhong smiled. "I have a plan for similar designs for the other yakshas as well."

The white crane tossed her head in what would have been a scornful way. "Well. They ought to look the part, if they are to be adepts. One believes that their current clothes are a little too... Simple."

He didn't really like Cloud Retainer, Xiao decided. He could respect her designing and engineering ability without liking her as a person. Or as a crane.

"One has a suggestion for the sleeve of the yaksha," Cloud Retainer mused. Her beady little eyes looked at the length of Xiao's sleeve. "If one were to put a weight at the end of it, it would not fly about so. One also recommends a design for him to wear around his neck, since the lower half is so detailed while the top half is rather empty."

Definitely didn't like her. Xiao held his elbows loosely, trying not to seem too defensive. *Breathe.*

"Hey, I thought you approved of it!" Guizhong chided. "I will take your suggestions into account, although I believe Rex already has a solution to one of those things." She grinned at Xiao, and he offered a tight, fake smile in return. "You look as striking as ever, Xiao. Don't listen to her."

He inclined his head shortly. "It is an honor to have met you, Perfected-Lord-Who-Retains-the-Clouds-by-Borrowing-the-Wind."

The crane nodded back. "Cloud Retainer will do, yaksha. It is an honor to meet you as well."

"Adepts, hear me." Rex Lapis's voice projected across the plain, and all surrounding chatter ceased. "Come gather, and let us initiate our new numbers."

Guizhong seated herself gracefully at the stone table across from Rex Lapis, and Xiao lowered himself to sit on the ground beside her.

Indarias moved to sit next to him, and it crossed Xiao's mind that she might be a little protective.

A flash of guilt shot through his heart.

All those gathered had arranged themselves into a kind of standing circle. Rex Lapis was speaking, but Xiao couldn't bring himself to focus. He wished that this could be over. He wished he didn't think so much about the actions he'd already taken. He wished he could understand exactly what everyone expected of him immediately. His heartbeat started rising in his ears, ringing louder and louder and louder—

“— and Xiao, the Anemo yaksha.” Rex Lapis said, bringing Xiao back down to earth. He'd missed all of the names of the other adepti. Now he'd look stupid or rude when asked to address them. There were only five other adepti here, how could he have missed their names, *why couldn't he focus?*

“Xiao. It's a good name for someone so small and yet so dangerous.”

He raised his head at the unfamiliar voice.

The Geo goddess with the scars was staring directly at him from across the circle. “Wow. You are *broken*. I thought that all the pain I sensed was shared between the people here, but no, it's really just you.”

“Excuse me?” Bosacius asked, suddenly defensive.

Xiao appreciated Bosacius for speaking up for him, but honestly, he was just glad someone had acknowledged how he felt, even if it was a random archon he'd never met before. “It's okay, Bo.”

“It's not okay. What do you mean?” Bosacius snapped. “He's fine.”

I'm not.

“He's really not, and it's unwise of you to deny it, Electro yaksha.” The archon smiled sideways. The scars were light against her dark skin, and her white, unseeing left eye looked deeper into him than her seeing right eye did. She tilted her head slightly, not dropping eye contact with Xiao, and waved at him a little with her one hand. “I am Jing, the Archon of Broken Things. I know that you are spiraling right now.”

He let out a breath he didn't know he'd been holding. He felt Indarias's cool hand on his shoulder and forced himself not to shrug it off.

“It's true. You're broken.” Her voice was low and steady. “But nothing is broken beyond repair. Welcome to adeptushood; we are here to help you, and you *are* capable of putting yourself back together. You can believe me.” She smiled warmly.

Xiao could only nod back.

Interaction wasn't his forte. He suddenly longed to eat a dream or two or five and be gone from this kind of emotion. He knew he should thank the archon, for saying what he needed to hear, for *seeing him for what he was*, but the words caught in his throat.

“Thank you, Jing,” Rex Lapis said, and Xiao was relieved. “On that note, I do have gifts for you yaksha.” He turned towards the blue-haired girl with the horns. “Ganyu?”

Ganyu. The name meant “sweet rain.” *Her name is Ganyu.*

“Yes, my lord!” Ganyu jumped lightly to her feet and summoned a large gold box. “To the newest of our members, we have ritual items that will assist with the slaying of demons.” She fumbled to open the box, pulling out a string of beads and a small censer. “The vajra symbolizes the

indestructibility of a diamond and power of a thunderbolt, and the censer is to dissipate the evil that a demon's spirit will leave behind. There is one of both for each of you." She began handing them out to the yakshas. "The vajra can go around your neck, and the censer can be hung anywhere you like."

The yakshas murmured their thanks as they accepted the items. Xiao could hear Antheas hissing to Somnius under her breath, "It is *too heavy* to wear as an earring, *stop trying!*" and Menogias stifling a laugh.

Ganyu held the last items out to Xiao. His fingers brushed her palm when he took them from her. She smelled like rain.

"Do you need help?" Ganyu asked him when he didn't move.

He blinked. "What?"

She hid her smile behind her hand before gesturing. "With the vajra?"

Focus.

"No. I have it. Thank you." His hands shook slightly as he clasped the white beads around his neck. The vajra fell just under his collar, almost as if by design.

"Nice!" Ganyu nodded in approval. Xiao watched her as she returned to her standing spot by Rex Lapis.

Guizhong leaned forward, placing herself right into Xiao's line of vision. Her eyes were bright with mischief. "See a pretty girl and all the anxiety just morphs, doesn't it?"

Xiao shook his head rapidly. "No!" He said, just a little too loud. "It's not like that." He frowned. "I think."

"I understand." A knowing smile crossed her face. "Take your time and think about it, okay? It's not as if once you meet a girl, all your problems will go away."

"I know." Xiao rubbed the beads around his neck. *I wish.*

◇ ◇ ◇

He was sitting on the grass, trailing one hand through the waters of the shallow pond, listening to the chatters of the adepti and archons around him, happy that Bosacius and Indarias were finally seeming comfortable enough to give him some space — when Ganyu walked by and suddenly sat down hard next to him, facing backwards and away from the water.

Xiao flinched, but managed to keep his head enough to not dash away.

"Ow!" Ganyu complained, looking up at the stag that had not-so-subtly pushed her to the ground.

"One apologizes, Ganyu!" the stag called out, casually turning around and stalking back over to the stone table, where Guizhong was looking pointedly away.

"Take your time and think about it" to Guizhong apparently meant "let Moon Carver the overly-friendly stag adeptus head-butt the qilin girl with the horns so that she will sit next to you."

Ganyu sighed and allowed herself to lie backwards, head just barely missing the edge of the pond. She blinked at Xiao, and he noticed for the first time that her eyes were segmented, violet at the top

of the iris and colored like sunlight at the bottom. “Hello,” she said, smiling. “I’m Ganyu.”

“Hello, Ganyu,” he replied softly. “I’m Xiao.”

“So what do you think of the adepti so far, Xiao?” She folded her hands over her stomach.

There was a golden bell around Ganyu’s neck that rang softly whenever she moved her head. The sound was soft and reverberating and extremely pleasant.

“I like them fine. Everyone has been very receptive.” Xiao sifted the silt of the shore between his fingers, careful to keep his Vision out of the water. “I honestly can’t say I think much about Cloud Retainer. She’s very... Uninhibited.”

Ganyu furrowed her eyebrows. “Cloud Retainer raised me.”

Archons. “Um... I’m sure she’s lovely and did a great job.”

Ganyu laughed, and the sound was not unlike the peals of the bell. “No, you’re right, she’s a little crazy.” She tilted her head back up towards the sky, reflecting the clouds in her sunset eyes. “She just says things without thinking about people’s feelings. Lucky for me, I learned around that and I have a little more empathy.”

The end of her long blue hair slipped and fell into the water. Xiao reached over and gently lifted it back out with one finger. “That’s good of you.”

“I try!” Ganyu smiled and closed her eyes, dropping her hands to rustle the grass around her. “Did you know, Xiao, that if you lie on the grass, you can feel the heartbeat of the world?”

He allowed himself to smile a little, lifting just one corner of his lips. No one else saw it; this half smile was just for him. “I’ll take your word for it.”

“One day, you can try it.” Ganyu sighed happily, eyes still shut tight.

Xiao basked in the sun, the water, the sound of the bell and rustling grass, and the presence of the people around him.

If home was the people...

Maybe this could be home.

Chapter End Notes

would you rather have shorter chapters more often or longer chapters every two weeks?

i like writing longer chapters.

they're gonna get super long pretty soon, i have it prewritten up to chapter 18 and woof these are getting LONG. i don't intend on stopping though this is awesome :D bring on the COMPLICATED STORYTELLING i am TESTING MYSELF AS A WRITER.

SORRY THIS CHAPTER IS SHORT. we in for it though. if you know me by now,

calm usually means some terrible shit is coming soon ~^^~

Thank you to my gamma reader for her OC, Jing!
chill with me on Twitter @indertia_

To Be Known

Chapter Summary

Fighting on the back lines of the Archon War was surprisingly not too different from what Xiao was already used to. Hilichurls appeared in waves, although for the life of him Xiao couldn't understand exactly what they thought they were accomplishing. Generally the demons that possessed the hilichurls just wanted to wreak havoc anywhere, on any life, regardless of how powerful that life was, but they never actually threatened any of Rex Lapis's forces. He had wondered for a while if perhaps he still fought out of desire to feed his dream addiction or out of fear of his previous master, but it was easy to see those by his side and remind himself of his contract and goal. The most difficult part of life now was not the combat, but rather allowing himself to heal and once again start spending time with those around him.

The biggest adjustment was for the other yakshas, especially the younger yakshas, who had very little experience fighting and had not been created with the intention to fight. Xiao often found himself assisting the other yakshas with combat, clearing whole areas with his new jade spear.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Xiao still found it easier to stay with Rex Lapis and Guizhong for the time being. He had grown accustomed to silence, and with the very friendly and easily excited yaksha, quiet was a luxury.

He had thought for a while that he would crave for the things that he'd been deprived of, like food or personal interaction. In some ways, he still did -- he loved the sky and the sun and the water -- but anything else was overwhelming and confusing.

Just pick a position and stick with it. It shouldn't be this hard.

The summer was ending, and he was still spending most of his nights sitting on Mount Aocang, lying flat on his back on a rock looking at the stars and ignoring the fact that Indarias sent almost daily reminders that he was always welcome back "home" at Jueyan Karst. The other yakshas, and of course the other adepti, were out nearly every night taking care of whatever adepti duties they had, but Indarias still took the time to remember Xiao.

Because of course she did.

This anxiety is getting really, really old. He balled his hands into fists, feeling his nails against his palms. Why wasn't he out there helping them? Why was everything different from what he expected? What had he expected in the first place? He was sick of wondering and sick of being disappointed and sick of being this way in the first place, causing everyone else inconvenience and pain, maybe he'd be better off still missing or better yet, *dead* —

Okay. Enough of that. Anxiety shouldn't be boring.

He sat up. There was only one place to go.

Rex Lapis and Guizhong always sat on the peak at the north side of the mountain whenever they weren't at the stone table. Apparently they had a good view of the land from there and drew less attention than they otherwise would have from a higher peak.

Xiao could vaguely hear them talking as he clambered over the rocks on his way up the peak. He wasn't afraid of intruding on them; he knew that they could sense his presence as he approached, and they'd told him he could go see them any time.

That in and of itself is a contradiction. You need people to drown out your thoughts. You won't go be with the people that want to be with you. You bother the couple that says you can talk to them but you also wouldn't have to bother them if you just *went back to Jueyan Karst* —

"It's *Guili* city, named after you and me. My name comes first because everyone already knows your name."

"That's okay. I told you I don't mind."

Guizhong and Rex Lapis's voices carried on the wind down to Xiao's ears, blessedly cutting off his thoughts.

"With my intellect and your strength, the city will be a great one, for sure."

"You have strength, too. You just don't bother to draw your sword most days."

"Why should I? I have machines to be swords for me."

"The ballista is not effective at close range. A sword is."

Guizhong laughed, and the sound echoed down the mountain. "I'll be fine! If they come within close range of me, you will protect me before they can do anything anyway. Or Jing will, or Skybracer, or Xiao."

Xiao's heart warmed, and he smiled a little.

"Are you just going to let your sword fighting skills atrophy, then?" Rex Lapis's grin was audible. "Are you going to become as weak as a noodle that happens to be surrounded by overpowering machinery and friends?"

Xiao pulled himself over the last rocks, bringing the archons into sight just as Guizhong grabbed Rex Lapis's hand.

"I'm strong enough to break your fingers!"

"You can't break my fingers."

"You can't tell me what to do."

"No, Gui, I mean you physically can't. My fingers can't be broken."

"Do you want to bet?"

"No — *ow!*"

Xiao burst out laughing, just for a few seconds, before composing himself and sitting down on the flat of the peak. "I would never bet against you, Lady Guizhong," he said, pulling his knees to his chest the way he usually did.

“They’re not *broken*,” Rex Lapis insisted. He didn’t remove his hand from Guizhong’s grasp.

Guizhong smiled at Xiao. “I’ve never heard you laugh before. It’s a really great sound.”

Ah. His chest tightened a little. “Thank you.”

“How are you, Xiao?” Rex Lapis asked him. “Unless you are only here to watch Guizhong be a noodle?”

“*You’re* a noodle,” Guizhong answered instantly.

Xiao tried not to grin at that. “I’m thinking about the other yaksha.” He hesitated. “I haven’t said this before, but you know, and I’m sure you’ve noticed over again, that I don’t really want to be around them anymore and I can’t figure out why. I don’t really want to be around anyone, but if I’m alone...”

His voice trailed off. He dipped his fingertips into the curved cloud etchings on the flat of the rock.

“... Then your head gets really loud, doesn’t it?” Rex Lapis finished the sentence for him, and he nodded slowly.

“These things take time, Xiao.” Guizhong turned to face Xiao directly. “Trauma doesn’t go away because you’re tired of it, or because you think that other people are tired of it. What they think of you doesn’t matter.”

Xiao shook his head so that his fringe fell down around his eyes. “I am tired of it.” His fingernail pulled against the edge of the rock, stinging as it lifted from his finger. “I do wish I could be around them. The younger ones didn’t know me before, but my family... I think they feel bad for me. Or they feel guilty. I don’t know what to say to them, and it’s not because I don’t want to talk. I just... Don’t know.”

“Mm.” Rex Lapis tapped the stone beneath them. A small wave of Geo energy pulsed through the cloud pattern, lifting Xiao’s hand off of the stone. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

“Sorry.” Xiao quickly recoiled his hand. “I won’t.”

The archons made eye contact with each other, making some subtle facial expressions that no human would have been able to catch on to. Xiao could sense the silent conversation that was happening between the two; he looked down and pressed his nail back down against his finger.

“Honestly, Xiao,” Guizhong began. “We don’t want to push you to do anything, but if this is the way you feel, I wonder if you would consider rejoining the combat of the Archon War. Being with your family in action gives you all a common ground and a common goal. I believe that becoming adepts together was a good beginning, but this would actually expose you to being around them and being with them.”

“To be loved is to be known,” Rex Lapis continued. “And right now, Xiao, they don’t know you.”

Xiao rested his head on his arms, pressing his eyes into the flesh of his forearm until patterns of light swam behind his eyelids.

Fighting again. Fighting with his ancient blood-stained black tassel. Fighting on a battlefield, surrounded by dreams and memories of burning torture, surrounded by a team that he had never once relied on or fought with before, showing them all exactly how powerful he had become, allowing them to know him, allowing them to love him? Did anyone love who he had become?

Did anyone know him at all? If they knew him, would they still love him? What if they didn't? What if they wouldn't? *What if they* —

“Adeptus Xiao.”

He lifted his head. “Yes, my Lady.”

Guizhong's russet eyes met Xiao's golden ones. “We know you. We know you are gentle. We know you are fundamentally kind.”

“You're very careful with your Vision, never letting it get wet or chipped, even though you know it doesn't actually give you any power,” Rex Lapis added. “You collect Qingxin flowers, one every day that you've been free.”

“When your field of vision is too wide, you get anxious, and you become very intentional about your breathing.”

“You sing to yourself at night when you've had a good day.”

“You think Ganyu is pretty.” Guizhong grinned.

Heat rose in Xiao's face, and clapped his hands over his cheeks.

“Gui!” Rex Lapis exclaimed.

“Li!” Guizhong laughed, innocently drumming her fingers on the back of his hand.

“Anyway.” Rex Lapis sighed, and Xiao bit his lip in an attempt not to smile. “You get the idea, my adeptus. We know you.”

And we still love you.

He released the breath he'd been holding. Breathe. In and out. “Thank you,” Xiao said softly.

“Of course!” Guizhong was still grinning enthusiastically.

“There's one other thing, too.” Rex Lapis gently untangled his hand from Guizhong's, ignoring her last attempts to hold onto him, and stood up. “I created a jade bird a long time ago that plunged like a spear and worked extremely well for me. I've since refined it for you, and now...” He waved his hand.

The most beautiful jade spear Xiao had ever seen appeared in front of him, glowing emerald green. The shimmering jade blade on the end of it was surrounded by six smaller prongs, all elaborately etched and inlaid with imperial gold, pulsing with light, larger than Xiao's black tassel, and *infinitely* majestic.

His heart caught in his throat.

He slowly rose to his feet.

“This is for me?” He murmured, hardly daring to believe it.

Rex Lapis turned the spear in his hand and offered the handle to Xiao, smiling slightly. “Will you join your family in their fight for me, my adeptus? Even if it means allowing them to know you?”

The spear thrummed with power under his fingers, almost as if it was alive, channeling his

elemental power like it was an extension of his own arm. He spun it in a neat circle, feeling its perfect weight, its perfect size, and the satisfying *whoosh* it made as it cut through the air.

He laughed, and this time he let the feeling of exhilarating joy rise and fill his heart, natural and pure and totally his own for the first time in years.

“Yes.”

◇ ◇ ◇

Fighting on the back lines of the Archon War was surprisingly not too different from what Xiao was already used to. Hilichurls appeared in waves, although for the life of him Xiao couldn't understand exactly what they thought they were accomplishing. Generally the demons that possessed the hilichurls just wanted to wreak havoc anywhere, on any life, regardless of how powerful that life was, but they never actually threatened any of Rex Lapis's forces. He had wondered for a while if perhaps he still fought out of desire to feed his dream addiction or out of fear of his previous master, but it was easy to see those by his side and remind himself of his contract and goal. The most difficult part of life now was not the combat, but rather allowing himself to heal and once again start spending time with those around him.

The biggest adjustment was for the other yakshas, especially the younger yakshas, who had very little experience fighting and had not been created with the intention to fight. Xiao often found himself assisting the other yakshas with combat, clearing whole areas with his new jade spear.

Everyone had a learning curve to catch up to him; he understood that much. He basically hadn't done anything other than train for the last centuries. But he hadn't quite realized exactly how far ahead of the curve he had become. The seasons passed until spring drew close again, and more often than he would like, battles would end with Xiao decimating hordes of hilichurls while the other yakshas struggled to keep up.

“Holy archons,” Bosacius had muttered after one particularly frustrating battle in Qiongji Estuary, an area that none of them were very familiar with, where a crowd of Hydro samachurls had just kept undoing the damage that the yakshas did, healing each other over and over. “They just never stop coming, do they?”

Indarias threw her sword down, not even managing to wave it away before it bounced once off the grass. “I did a little bit of research,” she said, sighing from fatigue and dropping herself down under a nearby tree. “The humans are deciding to turn their stint with the lanterns into an annual festival, and the demons are attracted to the positive energy they're giving off.”

The other yaksha made small sounds of acknowledgement.

Xiao chewed his lip. He'd been better about asking about the things that he had missed in the last years, but he still sometimes had to swallow his anxiety in order to speak. “What was the stint with the lanterns?”

Pervases had face-planted into the grass the moment the last hilichurl exploded, but now he propped himself up on his elbows. “When some Millelith mercenaries were recruited to help with the battle for the Mondstadt seat, some of the humans back here in Liyue started to release fire lanterns to remind the soldiers of home. They did it pretty much every year until Barbatos ascended, but they probably miss doing it now.” He looked anxiously to Indarias for confirmation and smiled proudly when she nodded.

Menogias groaned loudly. “This is why positive energy is bad.” She spun her bow on her arm.

“Did you hear that, Somnius? Positive energy bad, negative energy also bad! Energy bad, just be a tree.”

“I’d be a good tree,” Somnius mumbled.

“That’s my boy.”

Xiao laughed. He saw Indarias smile at him in his peripheral vision.

“It isn’t as if we cannot handle the amount of invading mobs,” Bonanus said, even as he lowered himself to sit on the ground and wiped his forehead. “They are not strong. They are just... Exhausting. I would still rather fight them than hordes of whopperflowers, or a Regisvine.”

“Would Rex Lapis make us fight a Regisvine?” Antheas’s eyes grew wide. “I’ve only ever seen the Pyro one in central Liyue. I don’t like to think about fighting it.”

“Even if you did, you wouldn’t have to fight it alone,” Indarias assured her.

“I’ve fought the Pyro Regisvine,” Xiao said softly.

All eyes were on him, all at once, and he instantly regretted speaking up.

“Did you... Win..?” Bosacius asked, slow and careful and a little too controlled.

“No.” Xiao cast a quick look at Indarias. There was one specific face that she made whenever he said something that hurt her, where her eyebrows pinched upwards in sadness and her eyes drooped, and he would do anything to keep her from making that face now, on a day where she was already tired from fighting. “I mean, I didn’t beat it. But I probably could have if I had some Hydro power. The corollas are honestly more difficult to destroy than the Regisvines themselves.” He shifted his weight, standing awkwardly, bracing himself for more awkwardness. “It wasn’t anything.”

“Wow,” Pervases marveled. “That’s...”

“So cool!” Menogias clapped, smiling sneakily. “I bet I could take a Cryo Regisvine in three shots. I’ll bet with you, Somnius.”

Somnius held up his arms in a x-shape, shaking his head wildly from side to side. “Absolutely not!”

The yakshas laughed, even Indarias, and Xiao managed to smile.

Somnius suddenly frowned and tilted his head from side to side. “Did anyone else feel that?”

“Feel what?” Bosacius stood and looked around.

“I felt it too.” Pervases jumped to his feet. “There’s a Primo Geovishap somewhere. Close.”

Xiao grimaced. Geovishaps, fully grown ones, were fast, armor-plated, and tediously difficult to defeat. They usually spawned in Southern Minlin, so if one was appearing here, then it must have been carrying a demon.

“Is it possessed?” Menogias sighed.

“Yes,” Pervases nodded.

All at once, Xiao was able to sense the approaching Geovishap, as well as the demonic energy that tainted it. He turned his spear in his hand. “How did you sense it from that distance? I didn’t even feel anything until just now.”

Antheas turned and smiled at him, just a little ruefully. “We might not be very strong, but what we lack in strength we make up for in sense,” she said flatly. “We are good at noticing energies and listening for any presence. After all.” She looked at Xiao. Her eyes were ruby red and cold. “Our whole purpose in life was to be seekers.”

“Antheas.” Indarias’s voice was sharp, and the Cryo yaksha fell silent.

They were created to look for me.

Guilt and a little bit of confusion cut across Xiao’s heart, and his jaw tightened. The younger yakshas had lived their whole lives looking for him, and in the end they had not even been the ones to succeed. Now that he was back, a stranger in the place that they called home, they had every right to feel bitter.

He had thought for weeks now that being with the younger yakshas was easy. He had started feeling more like he belonged. He had never once considered that they would resent him.

Breathe, he reminded himself, even as panic started to rise in his throat, burning up into his sinuses and behind his eyes. Inhale in. Exhale out.

Then he blinked, suddenly aware of the sounds around him. A familiar presence had started fighting the Geovishap.

He turned and bolted away from the other yakshas, ignoring the sounds of Bosacius calling after him, feeling the hard ground under his soles and the wind pulling his streamers straight out behind him as he sprinted. He was faster than they were, but they could catch up.

Someone, not far ahead of him, was screaming in fear.

He jumped over a river and down a ravine, sensing the Geovishap and the other presence getting closer, just coming into sight, did he have enough time — ?

The Primo Geovishap was glowing with Geo power, spiky armored tail waving in the air, talons stretched out in attack, and one blue-haired horned qilin girl sticking halfway out of its mouth repeatedly smacking its face with her bow.

“*Ganyu!*” He shouted, spinning his spear, ready to charge forward.

She looked over abruptly at the sound of her name. The bell around her neck rang wildly. “Xiao?”

The Geovishap made a gurgling sound.

“Ganyu *don’t move* I’ll kill it just wait a second I can kill it...” He turned his spear and passed his hand over his face, summoning his mask, bracing himself for the voices of karma to appear, louder with every time he used it...

Worthless useless inferior trash pathetic miserable wretch hate you HATE YOU HATE YOU —

“Xiao, no, wait, it’s okay!” Ganyu yelled frantically, waving her arms at him. “Just wait a minute! I’m okay!”

How could she possibly be okay??? Xiao prepared himself to jump, tightening his hold on his spear — when the Geovishap suddenly closed its eyes and collapsed.

Xiao's mask whooshed off of his face, and his jaw dropped a little.

The glow of the Geovishap's power faded. It was clearly dead.

“What..?” He looked down at Ganyu lying on the ground still wedged between the Geovishap's jaws, too puzzled to help her up. “What just happened?”

Her face was bright red. “I defeated a Geovishap.”

“Yes, but how? Did you poison it?”

“No.” She pushed at the Geovishap's jaw. “Can you help me out?”

“Oh!” *You idiot*, Xiao cursed himself. “Yes. Sorry.” He spun his spear so the head faced downwards and thrust the jade point into the Geovishap's side. It disintegrated, leaving behind a few bones, and Ganyu dropped to the ground.

“Thank you.” She stood and brushed the dirt from her thighs.

The other yakshas appeared behind Xiao, having finally caught up. “What happened to the Primo Geovishap?” Bosacius demanded. “Its energy just disappeared so suddenly. There's no way you killed it in such a short amount of time.”

“Ganyu killed it,” Xiao informed him. “I don't know how.”

“Oh.” Ganyu's voice was small. “It tried to eat me and it choked and died. That is all. Thank you for coming, though.” She timidly waved a little at the yakshas, and Pervases waved back cheerfully.

“It choked and died?” A highly amused grin stretched across Menogias's face. “*It choked and died?*” She drew the shape of a 3 in the air with her glowing finger. “What good fortune to be so well-endowed in the curve department, huh, Miss Ganyu?”

Oh.

Ganyu was red all the way to the tips of her ears. “Liyuen cuisine is excellent, and qilin have big appetites, and it all worked out for me today, so praise Rex Lapis!” She smiled, a little crooked and embarrassed but still glad.

Xiao let out a short laugh, just from the awkwardness, but it was enough for the attention to turn back to him.

Indarias walked right up to him. “Please don't just run off like that again,” she said to him under her breath. “Please.”

He bit his lip and nodded. “I won't. I'm sorry.” He reached out and gingerly squeezed her arm, trying to be reassuring.

She nodded a little, and he let go.

The sun was starting to set. A few lanterns were starting to come up from the city. Xiao could sense the positivity and the happiness in the air as the festival started up.

He could also sense the demons stirring in the outskirts.

“Are you hurt, Miss Ganyu?” Pervases was asking.

“Not at all!” Ganyu looked herself up and down. “All is well. Thank you.”

Antheas pointed to the Cryo Vision at Ganyu’s waist, head tilted. “Why didn’t you use Cryo power against the Geovishap?”

Ganyu’s hand flew to the Vision, twisting the silk kumihimo cords back and forth. “Truthfully, I’m not very used to using it,” she explained shyly. I’m primarily a secretary for the Qixing, and when I made that commitment I received the Vision, so I haven’t had any formal training on how to use it.” She looked sideways at Xiao. “I am willing to learn, though, if someone would train me.”

Bonanus held up a hand before anyone could respond. “The Lantern Rite is beginning, and we must perform the Nuo Dance of Evil Conquering. Perhaps, Miss Ganyu, another time — but tonight is a night reserved for combat.”

The half-qilin nodded. “Thank you for coming to my aid, yakshas. I will remember this always, and I wish you good luck and the most abundant blessings tonight.”

The yakshas murmured their thanks as Ganyu turned and walked towards the city, her bell making soft ringing sounds that soothed Xiao’s nerves, at least a little.

Bosacius sighed. “I’m not the only one that can feel all the demons just preparing to attack the city, right?”

“No,” Pervases replied dully.

“It’ll be a long night.” Indarias summoned her sword and swung it experimentally in her hand. “Prepare your hearts.”

Menogias laughed, nocking a bolt of fire into her bow. “It’ll be easy! Hopefully as easy as having such magnificent bodily curves that a *Primo Geovishap* chokes on the expanse. ‘Abundant blessings.’ Ha!” She laughed again and looked at Somnius. “First to a hundred kills wins?”

“Easy!” Somnius sprinted forward, spinning his catalyst on the tip of one finger, and the other yakshas followed close behind.

Xiao held his spear tightly, still looking towards the city, hoping that Ganyu’s wish for luck would follow through.

◇ ◇ ◇

The hilichurls were easy to kill, but their sheer numbers had demanded that Xiao summon his mask multiple times throughout the night. He had managed to block out the voices by sneaking dreams in between kills, tearing the shades from the hilichurls when he was positive that his brothers and sisters were too preoccupied to notice, and swallowing down the sweetness as quickly as possible.

To their credit, the other yakshas worked very well together, managing to trade off healing from Indarias when necessary and pushing forward through the hordes even when Xiao could sense that they were ready to collapse. By the time the sun came up and the first day of the Lantern Rite ended, each of them was sweating, exhausted, and covered in wounds and burns from the constant streams of hilichurls.

His mask was heavy at his side. He tried to ignore the tight feeling of wiry karmic binds around his wrists. *Breathe. You are safe.*

“How many days does the Lantern Rite last?” Pervases asked breathlessly as he sent the last hilichurl flying with a burst of Geo energy. “One? Just one, right?”

“*Five.*” Indarias was rubbing her eyes. “We have to do this every night for the next four nights.”

“I’ve made a mistake,” Bonanus moaned, stabbing his claymore into the ground. “I never should have become an adeptus.”

Xiao wasn’t sure if he was serious or not. He was too tired to distinguish.

“Menogias, you were *amazing.*” Bosacius patted his sister’s back. “The area of effect for your Pyro attacks? Took out so many hilichurls at once. There’s no way we could have done that without you.”

Menogias didn’t look very well. Her usually bright skin and hair seemed washed-out and dim in the light of the dawn. “Thank you,” she yawned, smiling weakly. Her yellow eyes were dark and creased with deep bags.

“I don’t know if we can do that for four nights.” Antheas dropped onto the grass on her back, throwing her arm over her eyes. “We can’t make Indarias heal us every moment, and we’re just going to get more and more exhausted every day.”

Xiao tilted his head. “Do you need to sleep?”

He winced as once again, every yaksha sat up and turned to stare at him.

A beat passed and no one spoke.

Breathe out.

“I don’t see another way to get through this Lantern Rite Festival,” he said quietly. “If you sleep during the day, you will heal faster and will be fully equipped to fight again through the night. You can just take turns, and there won’t be any risk of...” He lifted one shoulder and dropped it again.

Bonanus shook his head. “After what we — what *you* — have been through — how can you even *consider* —”

“I’m doing it.” Menogias lowered herself onto the grass with a little help from Bosacius. “He’s right. We can’t get through this without sleep. If whoever’s watching could just stay awake this time, we will be fine.” She closed her eyes and was breathing evenly in seconds.

Bonanus looked stung.

The younger yakshas had more or less already followed Menogias, their bodies just a little less resistant to the long hours of fighting and ready to experience rest they never had before. Bonanus looked over their still forms, eyebrows deeply furrowed and eyes anxiously wide.

Bosacius spoke first. “She didn’t mean that, Bonanus.”

The Geo yaksha did not respond.

Xiao’s shoulders trembled slightly.

Indarias patted the grass. “You should get some rest, Bosacius.” She did not look at Bonanus when she spoke. “You too, Xiao and Bonanus. I will stay awake. It is broad daylight. We will be okay.”

Xiao winced. “I do not sleep. But I don’t really need it. I’ll keep watch with you, Indarias.”

Bosacius nodded slowly, keeling over onto the grass. His eyes were already closing.

Indarias, Bonanus, and Xiao sat in silence.

Bonanus, outright ignoring Indarias’s suggestion to rest, folded his large arms tightly over his chest.

She tried again. “Are you quite sure you don’t need to — “

“ — I am well aware of my own limits.” Bonanus’s eyes flicked over to Xiao. “Thank you.” His words were distantly cold and polite, not at all the way Xiao remembered he would usually speak to Indarias.

Indarias nodded once, curt and just as polite.

Xiao closed his eyes, feeling the warmth of the sun on his face. *I am not here right now. I don’t have to focus on this. I can think about the things I like.* Inhale. Exhale. He allowed his mind to drift away. *When this is over, you can go home. You can have zhenxinsan with Rex Lapis and Guizhong. You can count the stars instead of counting hilichurls dying. You can pick Qingxin. You don’t need sleep. You can fight for four more nights. This is all a part of the process for them to know you. Breathe.*

He relaxed his shoulders. Meditation. It helped with some things.

He could smell sandbearer wood. He could hear Bosacius and Pervases snoring softly. He could feel the sunlight, the soft grass underneath him, and the gentle breeze. If he tried hard enough, he could hear the prayers of the Liyuen people in the city, and their voices were much more peaceful and encouraging than the whispering screams of karma he was used to. He exhaled, not daring to hum aloud, but singing to himself in his head:

*When your heart feels heavy
Let this song carry you away
When the darkness comes
Just know that I’ll be here
Always watching you
I will be right here.*

I know where I am. I am right here. And I am safe.

If he kept his eyes shut, Xiao could pretend that everything was okay.

And then Menogias started screaming.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for waiting and thank you for reading!!

can't wait to get to the good stuff >:) i lowkey missed writing angst.

chill with me on twitter @indertia_

Before I Go

Chapter Notes

Happy early chapter <3

enjoy, and please read the note at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Get them off of me!” Menogias screamed, thrashing, eyes still shut tight. The grass all around her started smoking and wilting as her body heated.

Xiao’s skin crawled and his mouth went dry.

Indarias quickly flooded the grass with water that evaporated instantly in wisps of steam.

“Menogias, you’re okay! There’s nothing on you!”

The other yakshas had bolted awake. Somnius started shaking Menogias’s shoulders. “Meno, wake up!”

The Pyro yaksha only cried louder, arching her back, clawing at the grass. Her hair burst into flames the way it did when she donned her mask. Tears cut streaks into the sides of her face.

“Stop! It *hurts!*”

Somnius quickly released her, and she thrashed harder.

“What happened?” Bosacius shouted to Indarias. “What’s happening to her?”

“She just started screaming! I don’t know what to do!” Indarias’s hands fluttered helplessly, healing uselessly, putting out the small fires as they happened. The smell of burning grass grew stronger.

Xiao took a deep, shaky breath and approached his sister slowly. Think about what helps. Think about how to help.

He could feel the eyes of the other yakshas on him. He should be getting used to that by now.

He reached out slowly and gently, gently, gently pried Menogias’s hand from the grass. Her skin was hot and glowing and he winced — but he started to gently rub her wrist between his hands. If he could just make the wire-cut feeling go away, at least a little, maybe it could help, maybe she’d realize she was dreaming, maybe she’d wake up —

Menogias groaned, relaxing just a little bit, breathing heavily but at least breathing, loosening her hold on the grass.

“Menogias.” He whispered, softly, as gently as he could, as quietly as he thought she could hear.

“Wake up.”

She groaned again, but her yellow eyes fluttered open. “Xiao?”

"It's okay." He tried for a smile. "You're okay."

"What happened?" Antheas demanded. "What was that?"

Xiao released Menogias's hand, and she slowly sat up, looking up and down at her arms. "There were... bodies... I couldn't move, there were these horrid sharp wires all around my body, and it was hot and I couldn't breathe..." She looked harder at her arms, voice rising in pitch and panic. "I've never experienced anything like that before, I'm scared, I don't understand! What was that?"

"It's karma," Xiao said quietly. "Karma wreaks havoc on your soul, and the more you kill the worse it will get. There's no escape from it."

Again with the all eyes on him.

He didn't really want to explain. He fought to keep his heartbeat steady. Breathe. "Just like the voices we hear when we put our masks on. We have to face the consequences of our kills. And that manifests in dreams where the karma descends." His nails pressed into his palms; he could feel them through his gloves. "I didn't think any of you would feel it so soon."

"They're nightmares?" Pervases asked. "How come I didn't have any nightmares, then?"

Oh.

Xiao closed his eyes. "I don't mean anything by this when I say it, but you and Antheas and Somnius definitely don't have as high a kill count as Menogias does."

"What about me?" Bosacius asked. "I fell asleep too, and I don't remember any dreams..."

Xiao raised and lowered one shoulder. His pulse was loud in his ears. "Maybe if you'd been asleep a little longer, it would have happened to you, too. I don't know."

Silence. He kept his eyes closed.

"Alatus... Xiao," Indarias said quietly. "Why do you know this?"

To be loved is to be known. To be loved is to be known.

Will I let them know me?

"I was kidnapped by the Archon of Karma."

It was the first time he had ever said it out loud.

The wind itself stilled in the absolute silence that followed. It was terrifying. It was liberating.

He swallowed. "I have a higher kill count than any of you," he said flatly. "I killed... He made me kill so many. All kinds of things. And he didn't care what. Hilichurls, humans, archons... I destroyed them. Sometimes they screamed for mercy. But I didn't have a choice. I cut them down."

Someone gasped.

His own voice seemed far away, not his own at all, and the world was red behind his eyelids. "The karma on my soul is... Almost debilitating." *And I'm addicted to dreams. It feels better if you eat dreams. Archons, I wish I could have a dream right now.* "He taught me some ways to get through it. But the best way to avoid it is to accept it slowly and not sleep."

He tried to sound casual at the end. He failed. His eyes were twitching and his nails were halfway into his palms and the silence was so *loud*.

So loud.

“Xiao...”

He opened his eyes.

Menogias was crying again, soundlessly, and so were Indarias and Bosacius. Bonanus and the younger yakshas were all staring at their feet.

He could feel all their emotions, mostly sadness and pain and righteous anger, but the strongest emotion he could feel was *fear*.

They are afraid of me.

The sun was burning on the top of Xiao’s head. Burning. Burning. Hot.

“I don’t want to hear that you’re sorry.” His voice was mechanical. “It doesn’t matter now, and since it happened to me I’m able to help you through this now.” He tried.

“That doesn’t make it okay.” Indarias’s voice shook. “That doesn’t make it okay and I will never not be sorry.”

Xiao cast his eyes away. Emotion was starting to build in his chest and he didn’t know what it was. Was it anxiety? Fear? Why is he feeling afraid of his family, *again*? He was making an effort and why are they crying and why don’t they look at him and the sun is so hot *the sun is so hot and I can’t handle this right now, I’m trying to let them know me I’m trying but this is horrible this is horrible why am I trying?*

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Bonanus press his lips together in a firm line and fold his hands in front of them, as if shushing himself.

That small motion pushed Xiao over the edge.

In one fast and loud exhale, all of the emotion left Xiao’s body and he let his hands fall open at his sides.

“I have to go now,” he said robotically. “I’m going to go now. Please don’t follow me. I’ll be back for the Nuo Dance tonight, but I’m going to go now.”

He didn’t look at Indarias. He didn’t look at anyone as he took off running towards Mount Aocang.

◇ ◇ ◇

He did not stay at Jueyan Karst for the next week. He did not stay at all. He did not know if his fellow yakshas were still trying to sleep their injuries away. He fought alongside them for the rest of the Lantern Rite and left as soon as the sun came up on the demons and he knew that his family was all still alive.

He spent the remaining hours on Mount Aocang, usually in the cool water of the pond or drinking the zhenxinsan that Rex Lapis had started brewing for him daily. He didn’t talk, and Rex Lapis and Guizhong blessedly did not push him to speak. He would sit at the table with Rex Lapis, drink the tea, knock his fingers on the table in thanks, and lie on his usual stone and watch the sun move

across the sky, all in almost perfect silence.

He was still not prepared to see the other yakshas the day after the Lantern Rite finally ended.

When he dragged himself to the stone table for his daily zhenxinsan, he was surprised to find that there was no Rex Lapis at the table and no steaming teapot.

His chest was tight and he furrowed his eyebrows deeply.

“Are you looking for Rex?” Guizhong’s voice was cheerful as usual.

He turned to see her standing with a basket of vegetables in her arm, and he nodded, still not quite wishing to speak.

“There was some battle or another the other night, and he hasn’t returned yet. I’m sure he’s okay though,” she reassured him quickly. “I’m sorry he wasn’t here for your teatime. You can spend some time with me if you would like. I have to teach an agriculture class in the city, but you’re welcome to tag along, and we can hang out afterwards if you would like.” She smiled, hefting the basket in her arms.

Xiao nodded again. He reached out silently to take the basket from her arms, and he carried it for her all the way to Guili.

He passively listened as she coached some of the humans on planting carrots and potatoes and cabbages, preferring to stay out of sight of the humans. There was nothing wrong with them — they were a good reminder of the reason he fought for Rex Lapis and made a contract to protect Liyue — but the temptation to eat their dreams was less intense from behind a tree.

Instead, he looked around himself at the city at the edge of the water. Across from the city was an array of rimstone pools full of sparkling turquoise water. The center of the pool supported a small stone pavilion, and the surrounding rimstone pools were littered with trees and brimming with life. He could not see the source of this life, but he could feel it, and it was refreshing. Luhua Pool, the place was called.

He wrinkled his forehead. *Lu hua*. Clear flower? Clear flower pool? He strained his eyes slightly. He couldn’t see any flowers anywhere around him, in the pool or out of it.

Guizhong walked up beside him, brushing dirt off her hands. “That was productive!” She said cheerfully before looking down at him. “Agriculture is a sign of a strong civilization, Xiao. If you ever start a civilization, you have to teach them how to grow food.” She had tied up her silvery hair into a loose bun for the gardening class, and she now pulled it down to let it cascade behind her. “It’s like I always say. Teach with wisdom, be bound by virtue, fortify the bones, and unite in ambition.”

“I have a question,” Xiao asked. His voice was low and gritty from disuse.

“Anything,” Guizhong answered easily.

He cleared his throat. “Why is this place called Luhua Pool if there are no flowers?”

She grinned. “Excellent question!” She gestured for him to follow her and started walking towards the rimstone pools, not caring when she started stepping in water that filled her shoes. The early spring sun was warm on their backs, and the water was welcomingly cold against Xiao’s ankles.

He followed her to the stone pavilion, and they walked together towards the pools. As they drew

closer, he could see the beginning of a stone structure protruding from the rock. A Geo totem sat in front of it, and he waited for Guizhong to interact with it.

She did not. She sat in the surrounding grass and motioned for him to sit next to her. “This is the place where I met Rex Lapis,” she said fondly. “He was small and awkward and he told me his name was Li. I can’t remember exactly how we met because it was so long ago, but I recall thinking the moment I saw him: *“I want to be his best friend.”*” She grinned. “And now look at me.”

Xiao sat and smiled back, just a little. “That’s nice.”

“Yup.” She spoke the word with a pop. “And then centuries later, when he finally grew smart enough for my liking, I gave him a kongming lock. I still wore indigo robes back then, and I did not know how to style my hair, and I was so serious for no reason at all, but...” She shrugged, and Xiao tilted his head, curious. “I gave him the lock, and I can still remember the exact words I said. I said, ‘this is the mark of our pledge, and it is also my challenge to you. All my wisdom is within it.’”

Xiao knew of that kongming lock. It was silvery-bronze and small, unlike Rex Lapis’s meteor that was amber gold and large. Sometimes, when Rex Lapis was still, the lock would revolve around him in an orbit of thought. Occasionally he snatched it out of the air and tried to wrestle it open, but most days he just allowed it to orbit.

Guizhong sighed abruptly and rolled her eyes all the way up into her head. “Naturally, he proceeded to ask me what on earth I was talking about because he had ‘never made a formal contract with me.’ Rex Lapis is a wise god, but he’s not a *smart* god.”

Xiao laughed. When Guizhong looked at him, he could feel her fondness.

There was love in her voice when she spoke. “He took it, and he promised to try to open it, and he’s never opened it — and probably never will, ha — and we’ve walked together ever since. The first time we met, the first time he kissed me, the first adeptal domain we made together, all happened here.” She gestured to the very spot they were sitting on. “This city is named for us. We will raise it together, and we will stay together until the end of time. Every time we made a promise, an informal contract as such, we were here.” She looked at Xiao directly. “And every time, the only witnesses to our promises were the glaze lilies.”

Clear flowers. Glaze lilies. Of course.

Glaze lilies, the beautiful glowing blue flowers native to Liyue, appeared only as tight buds in the daytime and bloomed beautifully at night. Looking around now, Xiao couldn’t understand how he hadn’t seen the buds sooner. They were scattered everywhere throughout the grass and around the edges of the rimstone pools, tightly furled and giving off no scent.

He poked at the bud closest to him. It bounced uselessly.

Guizhong reached out and stilled it with one finger. “I’m going to tell you a secret,” she winked. “There is a way to open them in the daytime.”

“Really?” Xiao loved flowers.

“Yes!” She traced the edge of the bud. “They don’t necessarily like being open in the daytime. Honestly, I doubt they like being open at all. But it is when they open up that they are able to best spread beauty and light as well as a pleasant scent.” She looked at Xiao sideways. “Opening up is

being known. Being known is being loved.”

Ah.

“Glaze lilies open at the sound of pure and beautiful music.” She turned her attention back to the flower in front of them. “I think that any pure and beautiful music will do, but I’ve been working on a lullaby for them —” she stopped short, thinking. “Hm. I supposed it’s a reverse lullaby if it’s supposed to get them to wake up. Basically, I’ve been working on a song. Do you want to hear it?”

Xiao nodded. “I would be honored, my Lady,” he murmured.

When she sang, her voice was cool and kind, not hauntingly beautiful like Indarias’s singing voice but calm and sweet as the scent of perfume.

*“Waking from your sleep, blooms rise
Let your beauty shine for me
Like fate let your leaves entwine
Showering the grass with light
Before I go...”*

The melody stopped on an awkward note, and the music hung uncertainly in the air. The glaze lily unfurled partially before wrapping back in on itself.

Xiao bit back a smile. “It’s beautiful.”

Guizhong laughed sheepishly. “It’s not quite finished yet. I could just loop it over and over and over and over until the day Teyvat disappears, and it would still just repeat and repeat. It drives Li insane, but the flowers like it!” She poked the bud. “At the very least, they open for a while.” She turned towards Xiao, and he felt the atmosphere shift slightly. “Do you want to tell me what happened last week, Xiao?”

A dam broke in Xiao’s chest.

He told her everything: how he felt about the yakshas, how combat was going amazingly, how he was relieved to be good at something, how he had run away from them to save Ganyu who didn’t need saving, how he had fought well the first night of the Lantern Rite, how he had told them to sleep, and how they had all stared at him and been afraid of him and refused to meet his eye and cried and *what, truly, is the point of being known if it means that they would be afraid of him?*

By the end of it, his heart was pounding in his head and his mouth was dry and he had sweat soaking through the fabric of his gloves. He covered his eyes with his sweaty hands, digging his palms into his eyes, trying to block out the light. The long ivory silk sleeve Guizhong had made for him rippled behind him in the breeze like a flag.

Guizhong was quiet.

To be fair, he had been speaking for over an hour without stopping or giving her the opportunity to comment or ask any questions and *really did he just really talk the ear off of a goddess??? WHAT IS WRONG WITH YOU —*

She caught the end of the sleeve in her fingertips. “I thought about what Cloud Retainer said about this sleeve,” she said calmly. “I didn’t actually consider how it would flap around when I first designed it, and a polearm user shouldn’t have clothes that would wrap around his spear in combat.” She fished around in the pockets of her hanfu. “I made this for you. I figured if you didn’t have too much jade on you before, a little bit more jade wouldn’t hurt.” She pulled a bit of silk

thread from her pocket and a compact jade ring. “If I put this on the end of your sleeve, it should weigh it down.”

Xiao blinked the light from his eyes and watched as she fastened the ring to the point of his sleeve before dropping it. Instead of flying haphazardly, it stayed decidedly flat on the grass. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“Of course,” she smiled. “You can never have too much jade. And also if you turn about very quickly, you could hit an enemy with it.” She grinned at her own joke before holding his gaze again. “You shouldn’t have to fight after the Lantern Rite. Of all the things to be afraid of, the last thing they would be afraid of is you. You and the yakshas, all of you... Take it easy for a while, and just be in each other’s company.”

Xiao shook his head. “Rex Lapis needs us.”

Guizhong sighed. “I already told him about how the yakshas need time to recover. He has seen how near death you look when you return from the Nuo Dances every night during the Lantern Rite. Your job isn’t to always be on the front lines.” Her voice grew in intensity. “You fight the invisible battle, which in many ways is *much* more difficult than what Rex is doing. The humans and the lesser archons like me will always thank him for his battle. He receives offerings of food and prayers and thanks. You...” She cocked her head to the side. “You get to sit here and eat nothing with me.”

The yaksha smiled. “That is enough of an offering for me.”

She burst out laughing and patted Xiao’s head. He did not flinch away from her. “You’re so perfect.” When she took her hand away, he felt it as a loss. “Things should be okay for a while. You all did very well at this Lantern Rite. Weren’t the lanterns beautiful?”

He bit his lip. “I... did not get to see them.”

He waited for Guizhong to wilt and be sorry.

“That’s okay,” she said, and he blinked. “The glaze lilies are better anyway. Of all the things I can create from the dust, the most beautiful things will always be the ones that nature itself created.” She looked at the glaze lily again, stubbornly shut in the bright afternoon sun.

*“Waking from your sleep, blooms rise
Let your beauty shine, for me
Like fate let your leaves entwine
Showering the grass with light
Before I go...”*

This time, instead of stopping, Guizhong repeated the song. Before Xiao’s eyes, the blue flower gently unfurled and opened, spreading its petals wide, giving off the gently sweet scent of the memories of the universe.

When she stopped, it closed again. “Sad,” she pouted. “Someday I will finish this song.”

“It’s really very beautiful,” Xiao assured her. “I’m sure you will finish it.”

She nodded. “Will you stay at Mount Aocang tonight?”

When Xiao answered, he was sure. “It would be good for me to go back to Jueyan Karst and be with the yaksha tonight. Do you think I could bring some zhenxinsan for them?”

Guizhong smiled widely, rising to her feet. “Of course! I make it better than Rex Lapis does!”

“Really?” Xiao had never had tea brewed by Guizhong.

She stared at him. “Who do you think taught him how to make it? You think he taught himself? That muscle-bound meatball head?”

Xiao laughed all the way back to the mountain, and when the sun disappeared over the horizon, he set off for Jueyan Karst with a teapot in hand.

“Thank you, my Lady,” he had said to her before leaving. “Will you be safe without Rex Lapis here?”

She had waved her hand airily. “I can take care of myself! I might head back to Luhua Pool and look at the glaze lilies in full bloom. It has been a moment since I had a night to myself anyway. Don’t worry about me, Xiao.” She smiled at him as he prepared his glider. “Be safe.”

“Thank you,” he’d said again.

“Good night, Xiao.”

I love you, he wanted to say.

I appreciate you, he almost said.

“Good night, my Lady.”

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Not four hours later, Liyue was shaken by floods.

Every adeptus bound to Rex Lapis by contract had been summoned, fighting off Hydro mimics and dodging blasts of water that seemed to shoot from nowhere and everywhere at once. Rex Lapis himself rallied the adeptus and shouted out direct orders all while repeatedly summoning his Geo whale and crashing steles into the source of the Hydro power beneath the surface of the earth itself.

It wasn’t until the fighting was over that Xiao learned that Guizhong, defenselessly evacuating the humans in Guili, had been lethally struck by a Hydro blast. She died in Rex Lapis’s arms, surrounded by blooming glaze lilies stretching their petals out wide.

The sun came up over the end of the longest battle Xiao had ever been a part of.

The glaze lilies wept before they closed.

Chapter End Notes

Guizhong’s song: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlnkdFsgRHQ

Thank you to my beta for the lyrics <3

Early chapter as an apology for the cliffhanger and also an announcement~

I’ll upload the next chapter two Saturdays from now, but life is lowkey getting in the

way of my writing time when it comes to the events following that. =_= I'm gonna do the best I can to keep uploading every two weeks, but if I miss a week please be patient with me! Summer is a busy season.

You can follow me on social media for more updates and maybe more content. I'm doing my best and I really appreciate your comments and your support and the fact that you read this fic at all <3 I love all of you (and of course I'm always around if you wanna talk. I'm sure all of us Xiao mains have deep-seeded issues l m f a o)

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Before You Go

Chapter Summary

“Rex Lapis... I knew he was a war god, but he never showed his warrior side to me before. It isn't pleasant.”

Ganyu pressed her lips together. “He prefers to be known as the archon for other things. In all my time knowing him, he only ever went by the Archon of Contracts, or of Geo, or Commerce, Wealth, History, or just Mora. He has never leaned this much into his warrior persona before.”

Xiao closed his eyes. “He's coping.”

They were quiet for the rest of the short walk.

From behind them, Xiao could hear Menogias babbling. “We can't possibly call it Guili City anymore, right? Guili Ruins, maybe. Guili Marsh. Guili Empty Land. Guili Nothing. Guili Remains.”

“Quiet, Menogias,” Bosacius told her sharply.

If she heard him, she didn't show it. “Ah, I know,” she said. Her voice sounded very far away from Xiao. “Guili Plains.”

Chapter Notes

Happy early chapter! My three year old niece is sitting on my lap singing The Sound of Music and I'm out here writing angst and pain (it's okay she can't read), trying to ignore how adorable and wholesome she is. I might let her type a little bit.

Dgfhdfetrrytkiuuyt

Well said, baby niece <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Rex Lapis was an unbelievable warrior.

With one hand, his spear called for waves of earth that slammed down into Hydro mimics, crushing them into puddles; with the other, he summoned golden jade shields that protected his adepti from giant waves that rose from the pools at random.

Xiao had never seen anything like it. He slashed another Hydro mimic into droplets of water, protecting his eyes uselessly from the spray with his already-soaking sleeve. He blinked hard, but the water clung stubbornly to his eyelashes. Fatigue settled into his muscles.

“Don't stop now!” Rex Lapis shouted from his position atop a nearby ruin, rallying the adepti

again. Xiao gathered his energy and surged forward.

It had been five days since Guili city had been leveled and the Archon of Dust had been just another casualty of war. Only five days since the ruin that Rex Lapis now stood upon had been a part of a whole city. Just five days since Jing reported back that the Chi of Guyun was responsible for all of it. And five days since Rex Lapis had smiled.

Water stung Xiao's eyes. He was past the point of wondering if he was crying or if the salt water of the deep pool was just a permanent fixture in the air now.

He didn't *think* he was crying.

He didn't think he remembered how.

"The frequency is decreasing!" Menogias was yelling from a little distance away. "I feel like it's almost over!" She spun in a circle, blasting flames everywhere. The salt water explosions from the mimics around her evaporated off her skin but only served to further soak everyone else.

"Thank you!" Bonanus yelled back at her. He was frowning; his feet were sinking in the oversaturated earth.

"About time," Bosacius gasped from next to Xiao. He had had the most difficult time trying to be effective without accidentally electrocuting everyone else in the process. With the saltwater all around them, Bosacius had resorted almost exclusively to physically demanding melee attacks. Indarias offered him healing, and he shook his head at her.

Menogias grinned at them, shooting flames out everywhere again as her mask appeared on her face. Pyro energy flooded the area, vaporizing Hydro mimics in a good radius. Menogias rose up into the air, eyes glowing behind her pear-shaped mask. She drew her bow up close to her face and started sniping mimics all around her, laughing wildly even when a Hydro boar dashed at her and clipped her leg.

Xiao made short work of it with a pass of his spear.

The jade shield resonated as one last giant wave crashed against it before receding from the pool and back into the ocean. Xiao looked up as Rex Lapis finally dropped the shield against them. "Finally," he heard the powerful voice sigh from above him.

Antheas froze the spray around her from the falling shield. Little ice crystals fell to the ground. She did not look at Xiao, but she kicked some shards of ice away from him. "You are very strong," she mumbled. "Good job."

"Yes!" Pervases added eagerly. "Xiao, you're amazing! It would have taken me, like, twenty hits to destroy that mimic, and you beat it in one shot! Will you teach me?"

Xiao nodded. He wasn't really listening. His head felt simultaneously hot and also cold, and his hair was plastered to his face and neck.

Sky Bracer, one of the stag adepti, swung his head abruptly at the yakshas, and Xiao flinched. "One thinks that there is something wrong with the Pyro yaksha."

"What?" Pervases swung around, and the other adepti turned to look.

Somnius was dangerously close to the burning ends of Menogias's clothes. "Menogias!" He was crying out desperately. "It's over! It's fine!"

The Pyro yaksha was still levitating, hair almost fully upright in flames, bow still drawn up, laughing with her head thrown back. “I’m *worthless!*” She screamed. “I am *nothing*, I am *free!* *I HATE YOU!*”

“Why is she saying this?” Somnius pulled harder on her sleeve. His green hair was drying in Menogias’s Pyro energy, allowing Xiao to see both his eyes for the first time, wide and panicked and horrified. “Help her!”

Menogias quieted just a little at the sound of Somnius’s voice.

Xiao grimaced. She needed to take off the mask... But he didn’t know how to help. He was helpless. He wasn’t strong. He wasn’t there for Guizhong. He couldn’t be here for Menogias now.

Rex Lapis floated to the ground beside him. “What is happening.”

His voice was flat. The words were not a question.

Xiao’s voice was equally flat. “The mask activates her living karma and it’s tearing her apart.”

Maybe the content of the sentence did not match his matter-of-fact tone, because Rex Lapis blinked in surprise.

“Is there anything you can do to make it stop?” The archon asked him slowly.

I don’t have the energy to try. “I could try.”

“Please.” Rex Lapis sounded tired, and all of sudden Xiao felt terrible.

This archon had lost his soulmate of millenia. Xiao had lost a woman he’d known for half a year. Who was he to be this upset in front of Rex Lapis?

“Somnius, keep talking to her.” Xiao called out to the Dendro yaksha. “Tell her about the things she likes, or good memories that you have with her, anything that can give her more positivity...”

He acknowledged Somnius nodding his head in understanding, dissolving into soft words and little encouragements that were fuzzy around Xiao’s mind. He retreated into his head, feeling the salt drying against his skin and the suddenly-appearing sun on his hair. He could hear Somnius’s voice, the sound of Mountain Shaper’s feathers flapping, and Rex Lapis’s deep, quiet breaths.

Menogias lowered from the air. The mask disappeared off her face.

The adepti collectively released a sigh of relief, but Xiao furrowed his eyebrows.

Her eyes were bright and gold as usual, but there was something weirdly manic and frenzied about them. They didn’t quite focus on Somnius’s face as he hugged her.

“Good fighting... Very good fighting! Shoot mimics. Mimics, square up,” she mumbled. Her gaze fell on Xiao, and she frowned suddenly. “Xiao, what’s wrong with your face?”

Indarias turned to look. “What’s wrong with his face?”

Menogias waved her hand vaguely in front of her own face. “It’s always... Frowning. You used to smile all the time, Alatus, like this.” She smiled, but the expression was stretched and strange. “You used to be so happy.”

Xiao’s heart plummeted.

“That’s enough.” Jing, the Archon of Broken Things, stepped forward. All the adepti turned to look at her. She nodded at Xiao before addressing Rex Lapis, and he took a few deep breaths. “My Lord. What do we do now? Chi will return at some point or another, but there must be other things we have to do to prepare.”

“Yes.” Rex Lapis was stone-faced. “The humans from Guili City must be relocated. I will not be rebuilding this city.”

Ganyu made a soft sound. Xiao forced himself not to look at her. “Lord Rex Lapis, are you sure?”

“I will not be rebuilding this city,” he repeated, and Ganyu fell silent. “We will move closer to the east, by the Sea of Clouds, and I will establish a new city there by the harbor. All of you adepti -- your contract will carry to continue protecting the people of Liyue, no matter where they are. Let the humans be a motivation for you, an encouragement for you, that as long as you have something to protect, you must continue fighting.” He closed his eyes and breathed out shortly. “Gui... Guili City is gone. But we still have a whole nation to protect. Let us go.”

He turned on his heel, swirling his white robes around him. The adepti quickly followed, heading off in the direction of the city remains.

Ganyu slowly moved to walk beside Xiao, after the beast adepti and before the yaksha. “I am worried about him,” she said softly.

“Me too,” he replied. “Is he... Is he going to ask you to move to the harbor city to assist the Qixing again?” He joined his hands in front of him and rubbed his Vision between his fingers.

She glanced at him sideways. “No. At least, not yet. My contract with Rex Lapis calls me to be their secretary, but at least for now, I will see this war through.” Her small voice was very determined.

Xiao hadn’t actually noticed her during the last few battles at all. He pushed his wet hair back from his face, trying to clear the haze from his mind. “I am sure you are a valuable fighter.”

She looked down at her feet, smiling, and tucked her hair behind her ears. “I know you are, too.”

“Thank you.” Xiao half smiled back. “Rex Lapis... I knew he was a war god, but he never showed his warrior side to me before. It isn’t pleasant.”

Ganyu pressed her lips together. “He prefers to be known as the archon for other things. In all my time knowing him, he only ever went by the Archon of Contracts, or of Geo, or Commerce, Wealth, History, or just Mora. He has never leaned this much into his warrior persona before.”

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◇ ◇ ◇

Over a week later, Xiao was pretty sure he didn't ever want to swim again.

At least not in salt water.

The northmost quarter of Liyue was composed of one island mass, Bishui, that hit unsettlingly close to Xiao. He could smell sulfur and hot water. And as if the Hydro mimics weren't enough to fight off, the yakshas had been summoned to take care of residual demons.

They were not particularly difficult-to-kill demons, especially since there weren't really any living things around to possess. Aside from the distracting Hydro mimics that Chi of Guyun kept summoning, the yakshas were focused on destroying a consortium of demon-possessed crabs.

It should not have been as hard as it was to destroy the crabs, but they had strength in numbers and were particularly aggressive with their claws. Xiao took to skewering them one by one on his jade spear in between charging Hydro mimics, but the sheer number of crabs exponentially lowered his efficiency.

Menogias was not very helpful, focusing very much on grilling the angry snapping crabs in her palms, laughing all the while. "What are they going to do?" She kept asking. Her eyes were bright and slightly unfocused. "Pinch Rex Lapis to death? Pinch-pinch!"

Bonanus groaned in frustration and crushed a handful of crabs in his big hand. "It was barely funny the first time, Menogias," he said through gritted teeth.

"Pinch-pinch," she sing-songed, not even looking as she crunched the shell of another crab under her foot.

Xiao wished he could be more helpful. He was able to keep the Hydro mimics at bay, but he couldn't shake the feeling of unease in the pit of his stomach. *I have been here before. I don't want to remember what happened here before.*

The only thing really keeping him from panicking was the fact that he could also feel the almighty energy and power of Rex Lapis. He knew that the archon, despite everything, always did his best to protect his adepts in every fight that they were together, and Xiao was as safe as he could possibly be in the middle of the Archon War. Rex Lapis was at the top of the mountain, looking over everything as far as he could see.

That knowledge did not keep Xiao's heartbeat from skyrocketing when he felt a sudden burst of overwhelming Hydro energy that could only have belonged to an archon.

His skin itched and his scalp tingled and his hands were cold and trembling. *Please don't be Osial, please please please —*

A large black dragon burst from the sea, and Xiao's blood pressure dropped in relief. *Not Osial.*

"Holy archons," Bosacius cursed under his breath. "The Chi of Guyun? How do we even start?"

Crap. Xiao hadn't thought about that.

"Could we use the mountain? Make it crash into the mountain?" Pervases asked, clearly not confident in his answer at all.

"Ohoh? Then what happens after it crashes into the mountain?" Bonanus challenged.

“I’m just brainstorming!”

“Cook crabs,” Menogias whispered.

“*Indarias!*” Somnius screamed. If he noticed the dragon at all, he pretended he didn’t. “Antheas keeps trying to fight me!”

“Face me like a real yaksha, you coward!” Antheas shouted, equally distracted (or unfazed).

Chi, the black dragon, screeched once. It was almost the loudest thing Xiao had ever heard; the ground rumbled, an earthquake rocking the yakshas’ feet.

“*Can you three please focus?!*” Indarias yelled back over the rumbling.

Xiao tilted his head forward. At least for a moment, his hair blocked him from the rest of the world. *Breathe. Breathe in. Breathe out. Don’t listen to them. Don’t listen to anything.*

Then Rex Lapis slammed a stele flat into the dragon’s back, and it crashed onto the land just in front of them, forming a large crater that boosted the yakshas up above it.

It wasn’t the grating, sickly crushing impact of the stele against Chi’s flesh that made the yakshas look up.

It was the broken battle cry that tore from Rex Lapis’s throat, echoing down the mountain and across the plain.

Weeks of fighting, stress, unspoken pain, and unshed tears were all expressed in one powerful shout.

The yakshas watched, totally motionless, bickering and fears forgotten as their archon levitated and crashed stele after stele into the screaming, writhing body of Chi. The dragon, which honestly should have been a much bigger threat than it was appearing to be, was coloring the sea red with its blood and falling apart at the core. The steles, piercing through the dragon and emanating Geo power in waves, were slowly transforming its large body into bits of petrified rock, and still Rex Lapis threw more.

“He’s using up too much power,” Bonanus said gruffly. “Every stele requires energy to create and then energy to function. He might be an archon, but there is no way he can keep that up.”

Xiao flinched as yet another stele punched through Chi, causing another ear-shattering screech.

Rex Lapis was glowing, even brighter than he did when Xiao first met him. His eyes, usually so amber, were almost red, and the light from the cracks in his arms was blinding.

“Is there anything we can do?” Indarias asked. Her hands fluttered helplessly.

“I don’t think there’s anything *we need* to do.” Bosacius crouched down to get a better look at the petrifying dragon body. “I believe it is more or less dead.”

He was right.

Rex Lapis stilled. His arms trembled slightly at his sides as he descended down to the remains of the dragon. With one pass of his hand, the massive, scale-shaped rock under his feet collapsed into rimstone formations with chunks of amber scattered throughout.

Xiao immediately leaped down to stand beside the archon, drawing up close enough that at least

Rex Lapis would know he was there. He stepped forward slowly. *Say something. Don't say something. Breathe.* This is Rex Lapis! He always has everything together! What do you say to the archon who always knows what to say to you? *Say something!*

“My Lord..?” Xiao tried hesitantly.

“I wished not for dominion, but I cannot watch the people suffer.” Rex Lapis looked straight ahead. “I wished for peace, and yet again I must watch – “

He stopped abruptly. He turned on the spot and disappeared in a flash of golden light.

Xiao bit his lip.

“What happened?” Pervases called from behind him.

I don't know.

◇ ◇ ◇

He found Rex Lapis at Luhua Pool, staring at the closed buds of a cluster of glaze lilies.

The archon was seated in a rimstone pool, water up to his waist. His robes floated around him. The light from his dark arms broke in the water, refracting in all directions.

Xiao lowered himself into the water next to him, not even caring as salt water soaked his clothes for the thousandth time. For a moment the yaksha and archon simply sat in the water together, mourning their mutual loss in silence. Xiao listened to the calming sound of Rex Lapis breathing, held his knees close to his chest, and watched as the sun began to set, casting pink and orange light over the surface of the water.

It seemed like hours before Rex Lapis decided to speak.

“Did you know that glaze lilies were her favorite flower?” He asked.

Xiao did not respond.

Rex Lapis turned to look at him. He seemed very tired. “As a yaksha, you know that the demonic is the shadow of the divine, don't you?”

He cleared his throat. “Yes, my Lord.”

“By speaking well of the dead, by speaking of good memories about them, we not only make it easier for the fragments of their souls to find freedom, but we also make it easier for ourselves.” Rex Lapis smiled slightly, and Xiao felt some emotion rise in his chest. “So let us speak well of her.”

Xiao rocked back and forth, rippling the water around him.

“You are allowed to feel pain from losing her,” Rex Lapis told him gently. “Pain is relative. The fact that you did not know her as long as others does not change the fact that she was someone that mattered to you.” His hand made a splash in the water. “Speak to me about her.”

Xiao swallowed the lump in his throat. “I... I wish I had known her longer. She was so kind to me, and so funny, and so understanding.” The glaze lily before him was so tightly furled it was almost just a knot. “She helped me a lot. I don't think... I don't think I could have healed as well or as quickly if she did not help me.”

Rex Lapis was turning a silver ring over in his fingers, a thinner version of the wide silver emperor's ring he wore on his left thumb. "She was always kind. She always had a heart for those who were lost, or those who had no direction." He smiled a little more. "Even when she was joking around, or intentionally annoying me, she would make sure that I was in a similar mood and that I knew that her intent was never to harm or upset me."

Xiao exhaled a laugh shortly through his nose. He could think of many instances where Guizhong's humor at Rex Lapis's expense had worked well to break the ice for all present, or even just to remind the adepti that the archon had humanlike feelings as well. "I know she taught the humans agriculture," he continued. "She had infinite patience with them, too."

"Ha! Her patience was far from infinite," Rex Lapis retorted, laughing for the first time. "But she did have a special place in her heart for the humans. She used to tell me that they were small and fragile, like dust. Like her." Fondness filled the archon's voice, and he held the ring still. "Small and fragile, and always trying their best to become more intelligent. So she forced herself to have the gentleness and patience to teach."

"Teach with wisdom, be bound by virtue, fortify the bones, unite in ambition," Xiao quoted.

"Exactly!" Rex Lapis smiled at Xiao, and Xiao found it in him to smile back. The archon turned back to the flowers before them and sighed. The wind of his breath pushed the buds away.

The sun set lower and the moon rose higher. The water, sky, and hills all took on the same shade of twilight blue as night drew nearer, and yet the glaze lilies refused to bloom.

When Rex Lapis spoke again, his voice was heavy with emotion. "When I first met her, she gave me this kongming lock, and challenged me to open it. And the last thing she said to me..." He sighed, but the sound was tender and affectionate. "The last thing she said to me was a reinforcement of that challenge. I think she tried to let it go, but even in death she could not allow me to slack on a test from her."

Xiao couldn't help but chortle at that. "It is one last way for her to make sure that you will absolutely not forget her."

Rex Lapis laughed, and Xiao could hear his adoration. "I could not forget her if I tried." He placed the thinner silver ring onto his right thumb. "I could not forget her if I prayed to." He laced his fingers together and rested his chin on his hands. "I could not forget her if the end of time came upon me and my essence was scattered to the winds. I could not forget her if I was torn apart by demons and my mind was drowned in the sea. Even when Teyvat turns upside down one day and I lose everything else that gives me being, the last word on my lips will be her name."

The archon's amber eyes brimmed over with tears, and Xiao clenched his hands into fists.

"I still carry her in my heart," Rex Lapis whispered, and Xiao barely heard it. "I still love her. And her consciousness, no matter how broken, is still existing somewhere in the universe. She will never remember me the way I remember her, but her love is out there. Her kindness is out there. And this puzzle that she left for me..." He exhaled, and tears dropped from his eyes and into the water. "Even though she isn't by my side anymore, she is still loved. And my memory will hold her until my last breath."

Teardrops.

"It's okay," he said to Xiao.

Teardrops.

“It’s okay,” he said to the universe.

Teardrops.

“It’s okay,” he said to himself.

Teardrops.

The glaze lilies before them glowed softly, even in their furled state, as if they could feel the godly tears of an Archon blending with the salt water of the pool.

The moon at this hour was high in the sky, and yet the lilies did not open.

Xiao lifted his head and took a deep breath before opening his mouth to sing.

*“Waking from your sleep, blooms rise
Let your beauty shine, for me
Like fate let your leaves entwine
Showering the grass with light
Before I go...”*

The glaze lilies gently bloomed, spreading their petals out, casting the smallest glowing reflections on the water, but once the song ended they closed up tightly again.

Rex Lapis took a slow breath in. “It used to bother me so much that she never finished that song,” he remarked softly. “Did she teach it to you?”

“Yes,” Xiao affirmed. He poked the glaze lily buds, disappointed that they hadn’t stayed open.

The archon smiled through the haze in his amber eyes. He opened his mouth to sing, and the rich, deep, sad sound would engrain itself in Xiao’s memory forever.

*“Waking from your sleep, blooms rise
Let your beauty shine, for me
Like fate let your leaves entwine
Showering the grass with light
Before you go...”*

*Nights and days will pass.
Don’t cry.”*

When the glaze lilies bloomed again, they stayed open.

Xiao and Rex Lapis basked in the light of the flowers and the moon until the sun touched the hills in the east.

Over the next few years, glaze lilies would cease to grow at Luhua pool at all.

But the Realm of Clouds, the stone table at Mount Aocang, and Xiao’s memory of the Archon of Dust would continue to stand.

Guizhong's song: www.youtube.com/watch?v=jlnkdFsgRHQ

I WILL BE RIGHT BACK I SWEAR. THIS IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PROJECT OF MY LIFE AND I WILL FINISH IT.

I finished my other writing project but now I'm teaching and directing another project asdfghjkl, it's overwhelming as hell but thank you so much for your support and for continued reading <33333 i appreciate it so so so so so so so so so so so so so so so much. I'll publish as soon as I can!

Answers to some FAQs, just for fun (and to apologize for the hopefully very short upcoming hiatus). Thanks to everyone who dms me on Twitter, I live for the positive conversations ^^

1. I'm 23
2. OF COURSE I HAVE XIAO, he's C1 and triple crowned because how could I NOT??? he changed my life
3. I rolled for Kazuha and I got Kazuha and he's great but I think it's hilarious how he was marketed as a guy with a "dark past" and I'm here like okAY BUT IS IT DARKER THAN XIAO'S????? I swear if you guys could see what's coming ;-; but i do love my inazuma boi.
4. I do have a foot in like every single fandom that exists but this is the only one I care to write about, at least for now. I hope that explains the very random retweets I have lol.
5. I live on the East Coast of America and my upload times are TERRIBLE LOL. HAPPY SATURDAYS FOR EVERYONE, IT'S LIKE 2AM WHEN I FINALLY UPLOAD

I'm really doing my best, and thank you again for everything <3 Your comments are a huge motivator for me and it's so insane to me that something I wrote has over 10k hits. I love all of you and thank you for reading thank you is SO NOT ENOUGH but bless and thank you thank you thank you. I promise on Lumine's life that I'll be right back. Take care of each other and take care of yourselves!

- Indertia

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The Next Thing

Chapter Summary

His heart was doing all kinds of things today. If he wasn't careful, the startles and the spars and the intense archonic conversations and half-qilin girls would give him a heart attack.

How vulnerable are you willing to be today? He asked himself.

He was already in this vulnerable state. She knew he was a dream addict. What did he have left to lose?

"I worry about the war," he started, slowly, carefully, choosing his words. "I worry about Rex Lapis grieving. I worry about my family and their safety without me. I worry about you and your need for elemental training. It can be overwhelming, but..." He chewed his lip. "I know I'm supposed to trust everyone to take care of themselves as well. Jing just proved that to me."

Ganyu smiled slightly at that. "It's nice to know that you care about us," she said, tucking her hair behind her ears. "It really is. But..." She looked up at him, and her eyelashes tapped her cheekbones when she blinked. "What do you worry about for yourself?"

Chapter Notes

did you miss me :3

tw; mild self harm but it's very very brief and not too bad

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The front lines were crowded with all kinds of adepti: illuminated beasts, qilin, Vision-carrying humans, a couple of minor archons, and hybrids of all things in between. Xiao didn't recognize most of them, though to be fair, he didn't always remember the names of the ones he did recognize. He had never had the opportunity to see this many people at the same time before, and the colors and shapes and sizes and energies were a little overwhelming, adepti and humans all laughing and shouting and sparring and talking loudly and preparing themselves for battle or for defense or for healing and interacting with each other as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Even his yaksha family, who were not even intended to be a part of the front line army, stood at the edge of the army. He could make out the sight of some of them interacting with the other adepti, making friends or something like it.

The sun sat high in the noon sky, and Xiao sat high above the harbor on a nearby plateau, legs hanging off the edge of the cliff, looking down at the beginnings of the city and the front lines of the Archon War, eyes shielded by his hair that really did nothing to keep his focus from rushing back and forth.

He wasn't stressed by the number of people below him. He was more stressed by the fact that he was more powerful than *every single one of them*.

He wasn't stupid. He remembered killing archons. He remembered being faster and stronger than almost everything he came across. Usually the only things that held him back from defeating something big, like the Pyro Regisvine, were his own karmic restrictions and inability to heal himself. His strength now was a benefit to Rex Lapis, so much so that even those that had been adepts for ages and had the right to treat him as a subordinate considered him a superior among their rankings.

It wasn't *right*. He hadn't asked for it. He hadn't deserved it.

And in the back of his mind he had to wonder if he should credit his former master for it.

Zhui had kidnapped him and tortured him and forced him to fight and gotten him addicted to dreams, had made him stronger and more resilient to karma than any yaksha alive, had brought him above the level of most archons, and had given him more fighting experience than all of these frontliners.

Xiao hissed in frustration. He slipped one hand under the gauntlet on his left wrist and pressed his nails into the soft skin there, feeling the thin texture of his scar tissue, feeling the mental strain of karmic binds, letting the pain from his own action clear his mind. Breathe in.

He could really use a dream or ten right now.

"Xiao."

Xiao snatched his hand back, whipping around and grabbing his spear from the air, only to find the Archon of Broken Things standing behind him with her one hand up.

Crap. He dissolved his spear and bowed his head. "Lady Jing, I apologize for that."

"No, no. I apologize for startling you." She lowered her arm and summoned her sword. "Spar with me, Xiao."

In the same breath, she had apologized for startling him and then startled him again. "What?"

Half a second later her sword, a light but deadly sharp gold steel, was inches from his face.

Xiao ducked quickly, summoning his jade spear again, using the pole to parry the next strikes.

He could feel her energy, putting everything she had into her sword fighting skills, even with one arm and no supplementary Geo energy, but the length of his polearm seemed to give him an advantage.

The initial fear he'd felt melted away. She was coming at him with everything she had in terms of skill, and he could only feel concern for the adepti army. If Jing's best was not even quite on par with Xiao's mid-effort defense, what was the rest of the army capable of?

"Stop holding back," he said to her over the clang of her blade against the jade pole.

"Start attacking me," she responded.

Xiao grimaced. He didn't know how to balance his power for sparring anymore. He hadn't sparred since his first century being alive, much less sparred against a one-eyed, one-armed archon.

“*Posui de*,” Jing said softly, spinning her sword in her hand. “Let it out. Attack me.” The corner of her mouth turned up in a smirk. “My energy is not all there is to me.”

Posui de, she’d called him.

Broken one.

A chill of validation swept over Xiao. He breathed out.

He dashed at her, faking a rush at her left to take advantage of her blind side, spinning at the last second and hooking his spear into the hilt of her sword, pulling forward until the blade turned and clattered to the stone ground. He turned the spear in his hand, pointing it downwards, and planted one foot onto the sword. He pulled his spear up over his shoulder in throwing position, directing it straight at Jing’s neck, feeling calmer than he had in days, feeling like this fighting was natural, feeling so, so, so wrong.

There was a new normal! This was not his new normal! His normal should have been beside his family fighting demons, not disarming and feeling normal while killing archons, *wait did you just think about killing the archon?!* Broken, he was broken to the point where what should have been normal no longer felt normal and all his skills he owed to his master and he was stronger than archons but he never wanted to be strong *put your fucking spear down and apologize to Jing — !*

Jing lowered herself into a martial artist’s stance, face totally calm.

He had the sudden realization that the goddess might be more deadly without a sword than with one. He didn’t know enough about weaponless combat to know.

He flipped his spear and leaned forward into a dash attack. There was no way she was faster than him.

As it turned out, she didn’t have to be faster than him.

The archon easily vaulted up and over Xiao, taking advantage of his forward momentum to kick his back so that he fell onto his stomach with a grunt. He caught himself on his hands and rolled onto his back, preparing to jump back up when Jing landed lightly on her feet beside him, headscarf and white hair flowing around her.

Her right hand was just inches from his neck.

He inhaled sharply and tapped the stone beside him to signal his defeat, and Jing withdrew, a neutral expression on her face.

“I am sorry for underestimating you,” Xiao murmured, sitting upright and dissolving his spear.

“For underestimating the whole army,” Jing corrected bluntly, expression unchanging.

“Yes. For underestimating the whole army.”

She squinted slightly at him, moving down to sit at the edge of the plateau where Xiao had first been. “I am still under the impression that you were holding back.”

Xiao sat a distance away from her right side, making sure to be respectful of her security. “I wasn’t about to treat you like the Bane of all Evil,” he shrugged. *I don’t actually know how much damage I do.*

They existed in silence for a moment. Xiao drummed his fingers on the rock.

“I saw you,” Jing said abruptly.

He blinked. “What... saw me what?”

“I saw you during the first battle with Chi at Luhua Pool,” she said. “I saw you go astoundingly quickly into a meditative state, tear the shades from a mob of nearby hilichurls, consume their dreams, and then return to the battle.”

Dread flooded Xiao’s chest and he couldn’t breathe.

“How long have you been like this?” Jing asked. There was no judgment in her voice, but her tone expected an answer.

He exhaled quietly, though the pressure on his chest did not decrease. “Apparently, two hundred years.”

“Have you ever eaten anything other than hilichurls?” Her eyes demanded the truth.

“Humans, qilin, and archons, but not at all since Rex Lapis saved me,” he answered quickly.

“Do you fight for the people?” She asked with a sense of finality.

“I fight for Rex Lapis, but I care about humanity.” His heart still felt tight, but he was a little relieved now that he knew her point.

Jing nodded. “That was a well-spoken answer. Thank you for your honesty.”

Breathe in. Breathe out. “Thank you for seeing me.”

The archon chortled. “I couldn’t *not* see you. You are potentially the most broken thing I have seen in my life, and I have been an archon for centuries.” She smiled at him now, a true smile, but Xiao couldn’t find it in him to reciprocate. “I had a village before, years ago, that died out due to a dream eater. I am cautious, but I am not upset with you. Do what you must to stay sane, but do not forget who your allegiance lies with.” She stood, picking up her sword and dismissing it with a wave. “You are broken. But don’t let that be the thing that defines you. Let yourself be put back together, okay?”

Her gaze was intense. Xiao tried not to blink as he nodded, still trying to work the oxygen into his lungs.

“Speaking of,” Jing mumbled, turning on her heel and walking back down the plateau without a farewell.

Xiao had been too distracted to notice Ganyu approaching, but now he heard her footsteps on the stone and the soft clangs of her bell necklace. The breath punched out of his chest when she took a careful seat next to him, arranging her bodice beneath her and letting the heels of her shoes click against the cliff.

She blessedly did not speak until Xiao finally relaxed enough to drop his shoulders and feel warmth in his hands again. “How much of that did you hear?”

Ganyu pursed her lips. “Enough,” she said softly.

He swallowed. *It’s not my fault*, he wanted to say. *I didn’t want to be like this. I didn’t want to be a*

dream eater. Please believe me.

“I don’t think less of you for it!” She exclaimed suddenly, sunrise eyes wide and earnest. Her hand moved awkwardly, and she pulled it back to lace her fingers in her lap. “If you’re not hurting humans, and it helps you, then, I don’t know, I think you should do what you need to do!” Her thumbs rotated around each other, circling without stopping. “I know we’re all coping with the loss of Archon Guizhong, and I know that you have infinitely more to worry about than even just that, so...” She shrugged, dropping her gaze again. “I don’t know. I’m here if you want to talk about it, and I know we don’t know each other that well, but you can trust me, Xiao, I want to hear everything that you have to say and I will never think differently of you for it. I know how I feel about you and that’s not going to change!”

She pressed her interlaced fingers to her lips, abruptly overcompensating her babble with silence.

Xiao’s heart did something like skip a beat.

Odd.

His heart was doing all kinds of things today. If he wasn’t careful, the startles and the spars and the intense archonic conversations and half-qilin girls would give him a heart attack.

How vulnerable are you willing to be today? He asked himself.

He was already in this vulnerable state. She knew he was a dream addict. What did he have left to lose?

“I worry about the war,” he started, slowly, carefully, choosing his words. “I worry about Rex Lapis grieving. I worry about my family and their safety without me. I worry about you and your need for elemental training. It can be overwhelming, but...” He chewed his lip. “I know I’m supposed to trust everyone to take care of themselves as well. Jing just proved that to me.”

Ganyu smiled slightly at that. “It’s nice to know that you care about us,” she said, tucking her hair behind her ears. “It really is. But...” She looked up at him, and her eyelashes tapped her cheekbones when she blinked. “What do you worry about for yourself?”

Xiao’s eye twitched, and he focused on the Vision on his wrist, pressing it between his fingers. “Sometimes...” Breathe. In. Out. “Sometimes I think I won’t ever be truly free, even though Rex Lapis has saved me,” he whispered. “I think that my old master still occupies my mind completely and I’ll never be rid of him.” He lowered his voice even further, until he wasn’t even sure that Ganyu could hear him. “Sometimes I blame Rex Lapis for killing him too quickly. I was never able to tell him how awful he was to me, that nothing he did to me was good, and how I will never mentally be the same again.” *And sometimes, I don’t even believe that the things he did to me were not good.* He closed his eyes, feeling just the warm stone under him, the overly bright sun on his eyelids, and the glass of his Vision in his hand. “He was the one that got me addicted to dreams.”

Silence.

His heart dropped in his chest. He opened his eyes, bracing himself for a long, uncomfortable silence.

Ganyu wound the cords of her Vision around her fingers, back and forth, back and forth, mesmerizing.

She had asked for the truth. Xiao wondered if she could handle it. “What are you thinking now?”

“I’m wondering what Lady Guizhong would say,” she answered honestly, and Xiao had to smile at that. “I know that nothing I say will be up to par, and nothing I say will help to make you better, and I probably shouldn’t say anything at all but the quiet is uncomfortable and I want to try...”

Xiao laughed.

“Why are you laughing at me?” Ganyu cried, more scandalized than offended. “I’m trying!”

“I know! I appreciate it!” Xiao smiled as gently as he could at her. “It’s nice to talk to someone that overthinks as much as I do.”

Ganyu blushed. “I understand. I mean I don’t, but I do.”

Xiao laughed again, just a short chuckle. “I think...” He released his Vision and planted his hands on the edge of the cliff, one on either side of him. “I think she would tell me a story about something vaguely related, just to make me feel comfortable, and then end it with some kind of poignant line that I’m supposed to learn from.”

“Hm.” Ganyu tapped the side of her face thoughtfully. Her hands were beautiful. “I could tell you about Jing’s old village?”

“Tell me.”

Ganyu adjusted herself on the cliffside, turning her body to face more towards Xiao. “When she was a human, she lived in this village by Wuwang Hill. A singing sea monster, a dream eater, lured all the young people of the village into the sea. It wasn’t necessarily drowning that killed them, though. Whenever they were found, they could usually be saved and brought back, but every time, their families would find that the youths had lost their essence and will to survive. Healers did not help, since the person would not truly be living regardless of their health. Eventually the village died out completely due to old age, since the young people were all just empty, dreamless shells.” She pressed her lips together. “The legend goes that their dreams still kind of permeate the air there.”

Xiao scoffed privately. No dream eater would allow dreams to escape into the air.

“Jing died and became an archon a little before then, defending the village from Osial.” She lifted her shoulders slightly. “He didn’t even really have a reason to attack this village full of older humans. I think he did it for fun.”

“He definitely did it for fun,” Xiao commented softly, more to himself than to Ganyu. He wasn’t prepared to share his experience just yet. “What does Jing say about it?”

Ganyu turned again to face forward. Her arm brushed Xiao’s, and a shiver rushed down the green marks on his skin all the way to his fingertips.” She usually very bluntly says that people aren’t meant to be forever and nothing is supposed to be eternal, not even Rex Lapis, but you can tell that she still cares about the people she knew.” She looked down towards the front lines or the adepti army, where the Archon of Liyue had appeared and was making his way to the harbor. “Jing says no legacy lasts forever, and there must be someone to take over when the time comes. It doesn’t have to end in death. But everything has to end.”

Her hand was so close to his.

“Guizhong and Rex Lapis don’t believe that,” he responded quietly. “They believe that love doesn’t end. Physical forms may be destroyed, and spirits might lose their sense of self, but the love that they felt... That was real, and it lasts.” He smiled a little to himself. “At least, that’s what

Rex Lapis told me.” His mind was quiet for the first time that day.

“That’s beautiful,” Ganyu swooned. “Guizhong and Rex Lapis... Their love definitely was real, and I can’t imagine it ever coming to an end.” She smiled too. “I wonder what Jing would say about that. I think she would agree, though; love never ends.”

The words left Xiao’s lips before he could think about them. “And neither will we, right?”

Her eyes went so endearingly wide that he could see her white scleras from top to bottom. “What? You mean, as unaging adepti?” She instantly bubbled over. “Yes, unless something happens or something takes out our physical bodies or Teyvat blows up or something like that, or...”

Xiao very gently hooked his little finger over hers, and she took a sharp breath in. “Until that day, will you be here?”

Her hand was warm. For a moment, Xiao didn’t dare breathe, waiting for her to respond.

Every possibility should have been running through his head, but his mind was quiet. He only saw the sun on her hair.

And then she turned her hand to lock their fingers together more securely. “Of course,” she almost whispered.

Xiao exhaled, allowing himself to have a quiet mind, just for a moment before standing and tugging gently on her hand to help her to her feet.. “We should go down. I think Rex Lapis is going to address us now.”

Ganyu nodded, pink in the face but smiling brighter than he had ever seen her before. “Will you help to teach me about elemental energy and using my Vision?” The words tumbled out of her, just slow enough for him to understand.

He cocked his head. “It might be better for Antheas to teach you, since you’re both Cryo archers,” he said. “She’s not powerful, but she’s skilled, and I’m sure she’d be an effective teacher.”

“Oh.” Ganyu let her hand slip out of his, choosing instead to twist her Vision cords. “Thank you. I’ll talk to her about it.”

He smiled a bit at the poorly hidden disappointment in her voice. Half-qilin she may be, but her other half was very clearly human. “I would be happy to spend more time with you when you’re finished training, though.”

“Oh!” She smiled again. “I would like that.”

Guizhong, you would be proud of me, Xiao prayed as he and Ganyu glided down from the plateau to the front lines. I’m healing. I’m trying. And it’s slow. But it’s working.

I’m ready for the next thing.

◇ ◇ ◇

Rex Lapis stood at the shore, flanked by beast adepti and looking determined as the crowd turned to look towards him. Xiao and Ganyu dropped to the edge of the army of adepti just as he began speaking. “I have conceded to the fact that Osial will likely be impossible to completely destroy,” he said. “In his truest form, he is gargantuan, as large as the city itself. With our power alone, we cannot possibly destroy him.”

Murmurs of concern spread throughout the crowd. Xiao subconsciously stood a little straighter.

“This does not mean he cannot be defeated,” Rex Lapis said firmly. “I have spent the last days preparing Geo spears. If Chi of Guyun could be pinned and defeated by my steles, then these giant stone spears should be able to pin and seal Osial as well.”

“Where will you find the space to do so?” A Pyro qilin somewhere behind Xiao called out.

Skybracer moved forward to address the question. “The working plan is to lure Osial as far out from the harbor into the sea as possible and pin him into the water there.”

A startlingly old human adeptus woman raised her hand. “How will you keep Osial’s energy from seeping into the water and harming the land?”

Xiao didn’t know that cranes could smirk, but somehow Cloud Retainer did. “One is engineering Statues of Rex Lapis that will carry his blessing. Seven of these statues will be spread out across Liyue and bind Osial’s spirit in those places. One is excited to see how history decides to interpret *that*.”

Small sounds of agreement and understanding were all around him. There were no further questions. Xiao chewed his lip, aware that every adepti knew that the residual demonic energy would fall to the responsibility of the yakshas.

“Geo users, I will ask you to lend me your elemental energy when it comes to it,” Rex Lapis was saying. “Cryo users, I will rely on you to bridge when necessary over the water. Everyone else, please continue to give it your best. Thank you for all that you have done already. You are dismissed for now. Please help out the humans whenever you have the opportunity to.”

He waved his hand once, and the adepti dispersed. Some of them summoned pocket dimensions and disappeared into them. Others sat and began preparing for the later battle. The last of them went towards the young city of Liyue Harbor.

Xiao could see the brightly colored clothes of his family approaching him, and he could sense Rex Lapis drawing closer to him. He breathed out slowly, trying not to sigh, and looked at Ganyu from the side of his eye. “Will I see you later?”

She took the hint blessedly quickly. “Yes!” She took a couple of steps backwards towards the city, hesitating for just a moment. “If I don’t see you again before the battle... Be careful, okay?”

“You too,” he responded softly.

Ganyu smiled, a soft blush still coloring her perfect cheekbones, and turned to walk away.

Xiao looked after her for just a second before turning to meet Rex Lapis and his fellow yakshas.

Naturally, Menogias was smiling dopily at him. “How was *your* morning, Xiao?”

“It was good,” he responded, trying to sound casual.

Pervases winked at Xiao, and the other yakshas grinned before turning their attention to Rex Lapis.

“Yakshas,” he said, smiling wanly. “Thank you for being here. I know that I have already asked you for more than your contract demands, but I have a special request for you.” He sighed, and for a moment all they could hear were the crashing waves around them.

“Anything for you, my Lord,” Bosacius responded, trying to be encouraging.

“Thank you.” Rex Lapis nodded. Xiao could sense his tiredness, but the archon seemed more at peace than he had in a few weeks. He brought his dark hands together in front of him, palms up, as if offering something. “Guizhong had designed ballista, giant crossbows, for the purpose of defending the city. They were meant to function automatically, but obviously they’re not here.” His gaze slid over to look at the younger yaksha. “If I could trouble you Seekers to move them from their current location by Guili Plains to a spot I’ve prepared by the outskirts of Liyue Harbor, that would be ideal for the upcoming battle. I would do it myself, but the idea is to keep the ballista a secret for as long as possible, and my aura draws a lot of attention.”

Pervases’s brown eyes went wide. “We get to have a special mission? We’re getting a secret mission? Yes, we’ll do it!” He looked around at Antheas, who was grinning in self-satisfaction, and Somnius, who was nodding vigorously. “It’ll be easy. We won’t let you down!”

“Hold on.” Bonanus raised his hand. “Pervases, you should stay. When it comes down to the actual battle, Morax is going to need your Geo energy.”

“Aw.” Pervases wilted. “That’s important too, I know. I know.”

“It’s okay!” Somnius clapped Pervases on the shoulder. “Antheas and I can handle this. Right, Antheas?”

She elbowed her brother in the ribs. “I know *I* can handle it. Who knows if *you* could handle it?”

“Ow,” the Dendro yaksha complained under his breath.

Antheas turned to Rex Lapis and bowed her head. “Thank you, my Lord, for the opportunity to serve.”

“You’re welcome!” Somnius replied jokingly, rubbing the spot on his side where she had jabbed him.

Pervases rolled his eyes. “Your mouth is a highway for bugs.” He ducked as Somnius lunged for him.

Rex Lapis laughed, but Indarias was frowning. “How are the two of you going to move the ballista? From what I’ve heard about it, they’re massive and heavy. You’ll have to move them over hills to get them here.”

“We’re strong,” Antheas replied. “And we’re smart. We’ll get them where they need to go.”

“I recommend you go as soon as possible.” Rex Lapis was looking out at the water, all the way to the horizon, all the way to the end of the known world. “I have a feeling that it will end today.” The archon’s amber gaze was hard and focused, his mouth set in a firm line.

Xiao could feel the opposing forces of Geo energy and Hydro energy churning in the air.

He wasn’t ready for this.

“I don’t like this.” Menogias had been quiet the whole time, but now she folded her arms and glowered. “The yakshas do not separate in battle. That isn’t a thing that we do.”

Bosacius slung an arm around her shoulders. “It makes sense this way,” he tried. “We are the warriors, and we can stand on the frontlines. They can be helpful from behind the battle lines. Is

that not a good thing?”

She shrugged him off. “I want to go with them,” she demanded. “I don’t think that they should go alone.” Her yellow eyes were sharper and more aware than Xiao had seen them in a while.

Antheas shook her head. “I don’t think you have to do that,” she said. “We’re not babies anymore, Menogias.”

Menogias glared at Antheas sharply. “I have heard *that* one before,” she spat. “And we all know how well *that* ended. What’s stopping you now from getting kidnapped or killed?”

Indarias drew in a sharp breath, hissing between her teeth.

Ah.

Xiao curled his hand into a fist, willing his heart to stay steady. He could feel the tension rising between the older yaksha. The air crackled with static, and the ground shook slightly.

“Hey.” Somnius put his hand on Menogias’s arm, and the Pyro yaksha’s face softened just slightly. He moved around to face her directly. “You are too valuable a fighter to leave the front lines, especially against a Hydro archon. They need you in the front.” He spread his hands out in front of him. “Antheas and I aren’t as strong as you are. If we do this, we will be more useful.” He raised one eyebrow, and his green eyes sparkled. “Also. If it helps you to think of it this way. Wouldn’t I be so much safer back by Guili Plains moving a few giant crossbows than I would be up at the front lines, trying to fight Osial himself?”

Menogias tried to keep glowering as Somnius spoke, but ultimately she sighed. “I wish you weren’t right all the time.”

“Let’s try this.” Indarias rested her chin in one hand. “After you move the Guizhong Ballista. After you set it up and it’s fully operational, Somnius and Antheas, let’s meet right here, okay?” She spread her arms out behind her, where the shore condensed into one large rocky outcropping. The humans had built a bridge over the water to the rock, making for a very nice little sightseeing island. “We will be able to see you from the city and from the water, Meno. You’ll be able to see them here.”

Somnius smiled, pointing at his head. “You can’t miss my hair, even if there’s water all around.”

Menogias narrowed her eyes. “Fine.” She moved Somnius’s bright green bangs out of his eyes, where they promptly fell right back where they were. “You promise to meet us there, and you promise you will be safe?”

“I promise!” Somnius looked back and forth from himself to Antheas. “We will be all the way back inland. Nothing could hurt us. We will be safe.”

“Fine.” The Pyro yaksha exhaled. “Make us proud. We will see you here, right after you are finished with your mission.”

“I will make you proud,” Somnius beamed, and Menogias smiled back.

Rex Lapis looked out at the water again. “You really should go now.” His tone was a little more commanding, a little more urgent. Xiao felt anxiety twisting in his chest as the yakshas said goodbye and the green and white forms of Somnius and Antheas disappeared over the next hill.

He looked up at the sun in the sky, shining through the most harmless, innocent clouds. The wind

blew on his face. He took a deep breath in and out, letting himself think for a moment that things might be okay.

Beneath his feet, the ground trembled.

Chapter End Notes

破碎的 — pòsuìde; broken one

Read more about Jing's canon village: https://genshin-impact.fandom.com/wiki/Records_of_Jueyun#Vol._3

ahhhhhh. it's been a too-long and also too-short summer. i hope you guys had a wonderful month <3

also my boi has the highest dps, reigning supreme at the top of my list and hopefully all of yours too

thank you for reading :)))

Victory

Chapter Summary

Osial appeared just hours later, days before they expected him.

The sun was still high, but the archon's sheer hurricane-esque power blocked out most of its light, filling the sky with storm clouds of Hydro energy.

This was war. Beyond that, this was *The Archon War*. Everyone knew better than to think that the enemy would work according to a logical schedule, or stick to the fact that it had only attacked at night up until now, or agree to begin battle exactly when they threatened that they would. They knew better than to expect fairness.

But they had clung to the hope that they would have had a little more time.

Chapter Notes

I really hate writing fight scenes.

tw; PTSD/flashbacks, gore, war

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

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Osial was massive in this form, taller than mountains and spanning almost the entire width of the city boundaries, his five heads and twenty eyes staring down at the adepti greedily, launching boiling Hydro spheres larger than Xiao's whole body repeatedly into the water and onto the shore, splashing tidal waves and forming craters in the land.

Xiao was not doing well.

Every cell in his body was on high alert, and he'd broken out almost completely in a cold, drenching sweat even before the first mimic reached him at the back of the battle. Chills of both shame and fear manifested in beads of sweat on his forehead, shame at hiding as far away from the frontlines as he dared, and fear that *Osial is going to see me, Osial is going to recognize me, Osial is going to put his filthy hands on me*, the archon had so many eyes and he was so overwhelming

powerful, *there's nothing we can do and no one will stop him and no one will save me* —

“*Xiao!*” Bosacius shouted over the sounds of splashing and clanging swords, bringing Xiao back into the present just in time to stab his spear into a Hydro mimic mallard. “What are you doing all the way back here? We need you in the front!”

Pathetic. Xiao bit the inside of his cheek.

No one knew what had happened with him and Osial. No one knew why he was hiding all the way at the back of the battle like a coward. Everyone was doing their part, and here he was, barely defending himself from a Hydro duck.

Who knew? Maybe Osial didn't even remember him. Maybe there were so many adepti that Xiao would get lost in the crowd. Maybe Xiao was overthinking this like he overthought basically everything! Maybe everything will be fine!

He told himself as much with increasing aggression as he sprinted, following Bosacius towards the thick of the battle, stopping only to help destroy mimics that broke away from the shore to run towards the city. Everything is fine. You are on top of everything. Osial probably doesn't even remember you. You're not worth remembering. *This is fine!*

The air was hot and thick with seawater at the shoreline. Oxygen slipped into his lungs, the consistency and texture of a wet towel, rough against his throat. Sulfur and salt stung his nose and eyes, and he flinched involuntarily against the feeling of wires around his wrists. Worst of all was Osial's sheer presence and Hydro power, giant Hydro blasts exploding into showers all around him.

Stop it. You're fine.

Everyone was doing their part. For a few minutes, Xiao allowed himself to just act on instinct, spear moving like an extension of himself, summoning his mask when necessary, combining his Anemo energy with Menogias's Pyro for a swirling fire effect, and accepting healing from Indarias.

Xiao breathed slowly, slashing his spear around him, standing with his family to defend the circle of Geo adepti that were lending their energy to Rex Lapis high above them in the air. Pervases, Bonanus, Jing, Mountain Shaper, and many others stood under a jade shield with their hands together or outstretched in front of them, offering Rex Lapis their elemental energy as he fought to push Osial's immense form further out to sea.

“You're doing *great*, Pervases!” Indarias called out encouragingly to the youngest yaksha, casting stamina restoration and stabbing her sword into a nearby mimic. “Don't worry about what's going on around you. Focus!”

“We're doing great, too!” Menogias beamed, casting a wide sweep of Pyro energy. She thrived in the battles in the water; her burning will quickly overcame any of the Hydro that attempted uselessly to quell her.

One of Osial's many heads let out a shriek above them, pale blue energy bright against the dark gray sky as it narrowly dodged one of Rex Lapis's golden steles.

“This is a good thing, right?” Bosacius asked no one in particular, directing Menogias's attention to a Hydro raptor and supporting her arrow with Electro energy. “We're progressing, aren't we?”

“For sure!” Menogias laughed confidently.

Xiao gritted his teeth. He was grateful for the morale boost in his fellow yakshas, but the Overlord of the Vortex seemed more offended by the stele than put off or threatened. Maybe they were moving forward, but Osial seemed more confident than Xiao would have liked. He turned and looked all around him, suddenly uneasy, suddenly noticing the Hydro blasts ceasing and the Hydro mimics falling back...

"Alatus!"

Xiao froze in place.

Seawater rained down on him, pelting him like hail, and he didn't even notice. His hands trembled where they held his spear.

Salt blurred in his eyes, but the watery, barely corporeal figure grinning with pure delight and standing on the shore before him was clearly Osial.

Osial.

Above them, the battle between Rex Lapis and Osial's true form raged on.

Bosacius dashed to destroy a mimic before it could rush at them. "Xiao!" He shouted, almost right in his brother's ear. "What happened? What's wrong with you?"

"Who is that?" Some adepti behind Xiao yelled.

His vision was tunneling, dark spots were swimming before him, he could see was Osial's terrifyingly cheerful grin, feeling hands on his skin, *feeling a long, snakelike tongue on his neck*, and he couldn't even run away, *no one is here no one understands no one will help me PLEASE GET HIM AWAY FROM ME PLEASE DON'T LET HIM TOUCH ME —*

"Xiao!" Jing was grimacing under the Geo shield, struggling to focus her energy for Rex Lapis and also address the aura of broken fear that Xiao was surely emitting. "Look around you! Kimaris is dead, you have nothing to be afraid of!"

He hadn't told her. He hadn't told anyone. No one knew what he was going through. No one understood. No one could possibly understand.

The world before him was starting to go dark around the edges. His chest hurt.

Osial looked Xiao up and down, eyes hungry and full of amused interest, smile wide in joyous surprise. "Alatus, it's you! You're an adeptus now? I like your new style. This new outfit..." He took a ghoulish breath in, as if taking in the yaksha's essence. "I like it on you." He tapped his own right shoulder, raking his gaze over the tattoo on Xiao's bare arm. "I suppose I could have a thing for tattoos." He grinned wider, and Xiao could smell the sulfur on his breath. "What are you doing here, Alatus? You're too powerful to be among these weaklings. You can feel the difference, can't you?" He leaned forward, lowering his voice to a soft whisper. *"I should have taken you while I had the chance."*

Xiao spasmed, trying to force himself to move, to hide, to do *something*, but his body refused to obey.

Bosacius scrunched up his face. "Who *are* you?"

Indarias frowned, breaking from her healing streak to glare at the archon. "And what in Teyvat do you think you are saying to Xiao?"

Osial spread his arms in front of him, ignoring the yakshas. “Adepti of Rex Lapis!” He called, voice suddenly booming loud enough that the whole of the army could hear him, shaking beneath Xiao’s feet and removing any hope he might have been clinging on to. “Especially those of you in that... Geo shield.” He gestured vaguely, a disgusted look on his face. “You cannot win this war. What do you have to protect? I offer you this: *give me Morax. Fall back. Let me take the Seat of the Seven, and I will let you all live.*” His voice lowered again, and he took a watery step towards Xiao. “Maybe, Alatus,” he purred, “you can stay with me.”

Xiao dropped his spear. The precious jade landed with a heavy splash into the dirty shallow water and he wrapped his arms tightly around himself, trying to make himself as small as possible, staring at the ground before him, pinching his arms in his own grip, teeth punching through the skin on his bottom lip, *no, no, no, no, no, no no no no no no no no*

“It won’t be so bad,” Osial crooned, reaching his hand up towards Xiao’s face. “I will take the *best* care of you.”

NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO NO —

“Ew, what the hell? Piss off, creep,” Menogias snorted. Her mask appeared on her face and she let loose one mighty Pyro blast, evaporating Osial’s sub-form as well as all the water around them for meters.

Sweat beaded back on Xiao’s forehead as quickly as it evaporated. He put his hands on either side of his head. He could hear the sounds of the war resuming, random screams and adepti destroying Hydro mimics, clashing of opposing archons... He needed to get it together. He needed to stand up and fight this war. He’d made a contract, he needed to stick to it, *needed his lungs to accept the oxygen going into them...* Xiao crouched down, forcing his breaths to steady, begging his own heartbeat to slow down. Blood swam in his head from the sudden compression.

You are safe, or as safe as you can be.

You have people that will protect you.

thankyouMenogiasthankyou

You are not alone.

Breathe.

“Xiao, are you okay?” Indarias asked, clearly trying to hide the stress and concern in her voice as best she could under the circumstances. Her hands were stretched out like she wanted to touch him, but she blessedly did not.

He didn’t think he could handle touch right now.

Menogias was muttering ominously under her breath. “What the hell did that guy even do to him? What the hell?”

“Meno, *watch out!*”

Xiao turned just in time to see Menogias dodge as a Hydro blast exploded off the top of the Geo shield.

Osial wailed as if he was throwing a tantrum, heads flailing and sending multitudes of giant balls of energy every which way, crashing scalding water in all directions. Xiao’s eyes widened as the

Hydro blast flew through the air, searing the seagrass off the rocks and sending massive waves up against the shore. A Cryo adepti nearby cried out in pain as some of the water splashed and burned a line across his shoulder, and the ice bridge he'd made melted under Xiao's feet.

The Geo shield trembled as Rex Lapis turned back towards the land, breaking the concentration of some of the adepti beneath it. "Stop! Don't let the water get to the city!" He shouted, torn between forcing Osial back and protecting his beloved people.

Some of the beast adepti flew upwards towards the lights of Liyue Harbor, working to knock the spheres of water out of the air or evaporate them before they could land. Xiao gritted his teeth, straining to keep calm, spinning his spear in a berth around him, trying to fight back enough mimics to make up for the loss, but the Hydro formations kept coming to rush and the blasts slamming on the top of the shield did nothing to help the focus of anyone around. Xiao could barely feel the burning -- he was practically used to it -- but the number of mimics was starting to be overwhelming.

"*Why are there so many of them?*" Indarias hissed. "Are we even moving in the right direction?"

"Shut up and heal me!" Menogias screamed back at her, jumping back up from the knockback of a rushing Hydro boar. "It's just like the crabs, okay? Keep up your stamina and *we can keep going!*"

Not for the first time that day, Xiao wished that the Hydro mimics were conscious creatures. He almost didn't even care that he was surrounded by people. Osial's surrounding presence and the constant fighting was wearing him down in every way, and just one dream would have given him the motivation to summon his mask again. He was falling apart and not at all in a physical way.

He chanced a glance at the Geo adepti under the jade bubble shield, all still trying their hardest to lend all of their power to Rex Lapis. Thanks to the shield, they were fully dry of any of the seawater spray, but Xiao could see the sweat plastering Bonanus's hair to his forehead and Jing's headscarf to her neck.

Archons. Who do you pray to for energy when it is the god of Liyue himself that needs *your* energy?

"Xiao, *move!*"

One of Osial's blasts hit the shore just at Xiao's feet, throwing him backwards. His momentary distraction had cost him just a few precious seconds, and he didn't have the concentration to turn with the fall.

The back of his head crashed bluntly against the sand, and for a moment he just looked up at the stormy gray sky, dazed and *tired*. He could hear yelling, could feel the freshwater of Indarias's healing flooding his body, but it all seemed desperately far away.

Osial's Hydro spheres flew across the sky. They were almost beautiful, being intercepted in the sky by dragons and beast adepti shooting Pyro and Electro, glowing aqua and scarlet and violet colors all exploding in showers of hot water that fell around him. The sand was warm and forgiving against his back.

Give up. The toxic thought formed in his mind. *Give up and face the consequences; let everyone else fight this war that you didn't ask for or care about.*

It was tempting.

He wanted to give in.

Then a hundred streaks of gold shot low and straight, directly from the direction of the city and into Osial's eyes.

The Almighty Overlord of the Vortex squawked like a chicken and stumbled backwards, deeper into the sea.

"YES!" Bosacius shouted, pumping his fist in the air. "They did it!"

Xiao shook his head and got to his feet as quickly as he could manage. "Did what?"

"The Guizhong Ballista are finally up and operating!" Bosacius was practically bouncing, his excitement getting dangerously close to setting off Electro reactions, and Xiao took a cautious step back. "They should be working on their own now! *We can do this!*"

"Did you hear that, Geo adepts?" Skybracer soared through the air just above their heads, shouting loud enough for all the army to hear. "Look to the skies and see the effect of the Gift of Guizhong! It is up to you now to give everything that you can!"

Geo energy pulsed out from the jade shield. Rex Lapis dove forward overhead with renewed energy, summoning spears larger than Xiao could have imagined and driving Osial further back with them. The archon's efforts combined with the energy of those on the ground, and the gatling rate of the Guizhong ballista truly brought the massive body of the sea monster and his subsequent Hydro mimics out to sea.

Xiao grinned, an actual smile of joy as his heart started beating faster, not from fear but from excitement. This was working! *It was working!* He had no doubts about Rex Lapis, no doubts about his ability to seal Osial under the sea, no doubts that he would never have to see this archon again. Everything was going to be just fine!

Right?

"Where are Somnius and Antheas?" Menogias cried, whipping her head around frantically. "They were supposed to be there! I was supposed to see them! *Why aren't they there?*"

Xiao's blood pressure dropped.

"Meno, it's fine!" Bosacius yelled over the sounds of crashing waves and Geo pulses. "They're probably just on their way from starting the Ballista!"

"That is *not* what you promised!" Menogias dissolved her bow. "You said they'd be there! *They said they would be there!*" She turned and dashed in the direction of the rocky island where the younger yaksha were supposed to be.

"Menogias!" Indarias called desperately after her. "Xiao, you're the fastest, go after her! Quickly!"

Xiao hesitated for a moment. "The mimics --"

"GO AFTER HER!" Bosacius screamed. "If she runs to the Ballista, that's exactly where Osial is aiming now, Xiao, *stop her or she is going to die!*" He turned barely in time to wrap an Electro bolt around a Hydro raptor.

So without a second thought, Xiao sprinted.

Menogias wasn't faster than him, but she had gotten a good head start. He could see her glowing form ahead of him, sand and water flying behind her as she ran.

He sprinted harder, tapping into his Anemo energy to dash faster, his feet sinking into the wet sand and the misty air seeming to hold him back from her.

“Menogias!” He shouted between breaths as he caught up, just an arm’s length behind the Pyro yaksha. “Stop!”

“I can’t lose them,” Menogias was muttering. “I can’t lose them, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t do it again...” She skittered to a stop at the bridge, turning in every direction, hair whipping around her. “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t lose anyone again, I can’t...”

Xiao reached out for her, looking around, searching for Somnius and Antheas, begging Rex Lapis and anyone who would listen, please, please, please, *archons above and below*, let them be somewhere safe, please...

“I see them!” She shrieked, and Xiao swore he could hear her vocal cords tearing.

Thank Rex Lapis.

Then all the blood drained from Xiao’s face, and he faltered for just a moment.

Antheas was sitting in a heap at the base of the rocky outcropping, just meters away, her eyes half closed, Somnius’s head resting on her leg.

His face was streaming with blood from every orifice, green hair stuck grotesquely to his closed eyelids, boiled arms spread limply around him.

“*Somnius!*” Menogias broke into a sprint again. Her Pyro energy burned her footprints into the wet wood of the bridge as she rushed towards the island.

One of Osial’s Hydro spheres was heading right for it.

“Menogias, wait!” He shouted, running after her.

He could feel all of Menogias’s pain and fear and panic rolling off of her in intense waves. The tails of her dress just barely brushed the tips of his fingers as she ran, now just a few meters from reaching the shore of the island. “Meno, the Hydro sphere!” He tried shouting again.

She clearly wasn’t listening. Her voice was frantic, gasping, past the point of hysterics, sobbing out Somnius and Antheas’s names over and over. “No, no, no, no, no, no, no... *Antheas!*”

The Cryo yaksha blessedly stirred, opening her eyes wide, staring in their direction. Xiao could see the relief and urgency flooding her red eyes. “Menogias! Xiao! *Help us!*”

He had never heard Antheas, usually so calm and cool, cry out in such a way.

“We’re coming!” Menogias shouted back, running so fast that the world around them was a blur.

The sphere was approaching, near enough that he could taste the vapor it was emitting. The island would not be able to survive the blast. It wasn’t big enough. At this angle, the sphere was sure to take out the rocky outcroppings and would encompass the island entirely.

He had to do something. *He had to do something.* The sphere was about to hit and Menogias was just inches in front of him and Antheas was opening her eyes and Somnius wasn’t moving and he didn’t look like he was breathing and *he had to do something he had to make a decision MAKE A DECISION NOW*

He dashed forward, wrapping his arms around Menogias's torso and tackling her to the ground.

"Xiao, *let go!*" Menogias burst into Pyro energy, grabbing at his hands and trying to wrestle him back. "*Somnius!*" she screamed again from beneath him.

He almost released her just from the all-too-familiar burning sensation around his wrists. He sucked in a shaky breath, fighting the urge to shove her away from himself and scream.

Xiao gritted his teeth. He had to stand up, had to get her away, had to run, but *where could he run to?*

Look around, look around,

look around,

There's a hilltop,

Get to the hilltop,

GET TO THE HILLTOP,

N O W

!

!

!

His body dissolved into light.

For a moment, there was just light.

For a moment, he was sure he had died.

.

If this was death, it wasn't so bad.

.

And then he came back into being, gasping for air, Menogias still locked in his arms, still burning, still fighting against his grip and screaming Somnius's name.

They were on the hilltop.

He had teleported them there.

He had teleported them there just in time to watch as the Hydro sphere crashed into the island, erupting the surrounding land and crushing the once-rocky outcropping into a crater.

Xiao's ears started ringing.

In the distance, he felt the presence of Osial at the bottom of the sea. On the horizon, the clouds were clearing. Rex Lapis hurled mountain-sized spears into the water, pinning the Overlord of the Vortex into the earth for good.

The Pyro energy burning his skin subsided.

The sun broke through the clouds.

Osial fell to Rex Lapis.

Xiao looked down at the shoreline, desperately searching for any remaining signs of the younger yakshas, *maybe they made it out, maybe they're okay, maybe they're safe...*

An emerald catalyst book, pages tattered and waterlogged, floated from the wreckage of the once-beautiful sightseeing island, tangling in what remained of the bridge.

Over the ringing in his ears, he could hear one long scream of agony from the yaksha in his arms.

All at once, everything he'd experienced in the last hours overloaded Xiao's memory.

Too much.

It was too much.

I am not here. I have no fear. I have no trauma or pain.

I do not breathe. I don't even exist.

I feel nothing.

Indarias, Bonanus, Bosacius, and Pervases found them like that, Xiao still as a statue, gold eyes dry and emotionlessly lost in the distance while Menogias screamed her broken heart to the heavens.

The adepti army was standing on the shore, still defending the softly glowing Geo shield, beating on drums and playing instruments that Xiao couldn't hear in what must have been a celebratory song, cheering for the end of the Archon War, oblivious as the yakshas' worlds crumbled.

Chapter End Notes

i love you guys <3

I dedicate this chapter to 2 of my mentees/informally adopted children, after whom i based Somnius and Antheas

fun fact, i told them in real life that i killed them in this story and they IMMEDIATELY turned to my third kid, my Pervases-inspiration, and yelled at him for not saving them LOL

so much of the baby yakshas's dialogue is based on real-life interactions that these three have lol. they lowkey make me wanna write a spinoff just surrounding the short but bright lives of the Babey Trio.

ONE THING AT A TIME THOUGH.

Might mess around and upload the next chapter a week early, lmk ^^

Follow me on Twitter @indertia_

Time Has No Meaning

Chapter Summary

His memory reached back to the last year, when he'd first been forced to meditate through his stress, and his old master's voice echoed in his ears.

"Tell me about your happy place. Give me a list of the things that you like."

Xiao winced, shaking his head to clear the memory. "Ganyu," he said softly, and she turned to look at him. "Do you have a favorite place?"

It was startling how quickly she brightened. Her eyes lit up with excitement. "I do! There's this lovely little hill in Dihua Marsh with a ginkgo tree on top of it, and I can see every set of mountains from it, and silk flowers grow in abundance all around it." She was smiling when she looked at him. "Do you want me to take you there?"

He couldn't help but smile back, genuinely this time. "I would love that."

Chapter Notes

Hiya:

If ya'll don't like Ganyu or are just here for the angst then skip this chapter. I stand by the fact that everything that happens to Xiao in this story is for his character development and not from personal indulgence but yeah whatever live your best life and Lumine will be here in like a thousand years or so. There's still a lot that needs to happen, and there is literally not a single thing that happens that isn't for the purpose of pushing his character. I don't write fillers but I am wildly insecure that ya'll are going to think this is a filler.

Reminder too that XiaoLumi is endgame, but this is fundamentally not a romance and my primary focus At All Times and In All Things is Xiao as a character, not his love story

TL;DR in the end notes

Also literally how did I forget to announce that I got engaged >_> planning stuff is a lot of work but i'm going to try to keep up this upload schedule, and i'll make sure to let you guys know if anything changes! You can get consistent updates (and chat with me if you want) on Twitter @indertia_

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Xiao didn't see much of anyone in the days following the conclusion of the war.

He imagined the other yakshas were off coping in their own way.

He chose to stay on Mount Aocang, but Rex Lapis wasn't even there most days. The archon spent much of his time now building up the city of Liyue Harbor, reestablishing the Qixing government and adjusting contracts accordingly. Sometimes he'd leave behind tea, or ask Xiao if he wanted to talk or needed anything, but Xiao generally felt too uneasy and awkward about wasting Rex Lapis's time to ever speak up.

It didn't matter anyway; Xiao had not been ready, or very willing, to talk about anything, much less the loss of Antheas and Somnius. He fell into a routine of numbness, nothing, doing nothing and feeling nothing and wanting nothing.

Time had no meaning.

He had a contract. All the yakshas had a contract to fight off the demons that splintered off of Osial's consciousness and flooded Liyue after the Archon War. They were supposed to be doing that now.

Thankfully, Rex Lapis was the most gracious archon in the history of time and allowed the yakshas to do whatever it was they were all doing now.

If Xiao had to guess, Bonanus and Menogias at least were releasing their pain on all the demons by themselves; Indarias was probably somewhere trying to comfort Pervases, who probably did not want to be comforted; and not even Rex Lapis knew exactly where Bosacius was. Xiao knew he should have been more concerned about them, or about anything, but he really just couldn't. They were ancient and powerful and experienced. They could take care of themselves.

Meanwhile, Xiao was sitting.

Time really had no meaning.

In the back of his mind, Xiao knew that he hadn't been particularly close to Somnius or Antheas. He'd never actually had a conversation with either of them one-on-one, and he definitely didn't feel like he had as much right to be as affected as Menogias or Pervases.

But he also had the shred of emotional awareness left enough to know that those two yakshas had been a massive part of his return to normalcy. Antheas and Somnius had made new life that much more bearable and provided a buffer between him and the terror of reuniting with the other yakshas. Maybe they hadn't been his best friends or closest siblings, but they had been his family.

It was easier not to think about it at all and stare off into the distance at nothing as though everything was fine.

Xiao cradled his face in his hands, breathing out as slowly as he could manage, feeling the warm air blowing against his skin. He was really wasting time, doing nothing when he could have been doing something, and he didn't even really know what he could have been doing, but here he was, wasting away.

He wished he could feel more upset. He felt weirdly calm, or maybe just numb.

The tip of the mountain was quiet and peaceful, and Xiao was comfortably warm in the shade of the maple tree behind him. He rested his head against the cloud-shaped whorls in the stone, watching the puffy clouds above him move lazily across the soft blue sky. The breeze this high up was pleasantly loud. Xiao idly turned his mask over and over in his hands, making a soft *shnking* sound as he rolled the ceramic across the gold chain. He didn't smile, but his heart felt a little less just *nothing* and a little more quiet.

“XIAO!”

Xiao bolted upright, shaking his head and blinking hard.

That was Ganyu’s voice.

Ganyu’s voice had just called his name, very loudly, in his head.

Ganyu needs me.

Ganyu.

Where was she??

His body seemed to act on its own. He closed his eyes and zeroed in on the voice and rapidly inhaled —

.

— and exhaled.

When he opened his eyes, he was in Liyue Harbor.

The sudden increase in pressure popped Xiao’s ears. He whirled around, trying to take in his surroundings as quickly as possible. He didn’t even know where he was. The ocean was behind him and unfamiliar buildings were in front of him, and he didn’t know anything else... He resisted the urge to run away and opened his eyes wide, searching, *if I’m here then Ganyu must be close, Ganyu, Ganyu, GANYU...*

Stop.

He could hear her.

He could hear rapid breaths and the soft clangs of a bell.

Ganyu was sitting on the stone ground, tucked in the corner of a building’s support pillar and a statue of a stone lion, her hands pressed tightly against her lips and tears cutting streaks in the sides of her face. Her eyes were closed, and she was trembling so much that Xiao could feel the air around her moving.

“Ganyu,” he said lamely, moving closer and lowering himself to the ground beside her. “Ganyu, what..?”

Her eyes flew open, but she didn’t look at him, instead shaking her head rapidly back and forth. Her breathing sped up, and Xiao scooted back.

Okay. This, at least, he knew a little bit better how to handle.

“Can you hear me breathe?” He asked, and Ganyu managed to nod. “Breathe with me, okay? Inhale... and exhale. In. And now out. There’s enough air for you here to breathe.” He could see her shoulders start to steady, and her rapid sobs subsided. “I smell the ocean, and jueyan chilies, grilled fish, and qingxin,” he continued softly. “I hear waves and wind and crackling sounds from people cooking. In.. Out.”

Ganyu took another shaky breath, wiping under her eyes with her thumbs.

Xiao did his best to smile. "I'm here, and I won't let anything hurt you," he finished. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Ganyu sniffled and lifted one corner of her mouth in a half-hearted attempt to smile back. "How... How did you get here so instantly? How did you even know I was —" she bit her lip. "How did you even know I was thinking of you?"

Xiao blinked. "Um," he answered succinctly. "I guess I can hear prayers. But I don't think anyone has directly prayed to me before." He shrugged. "And then I teleported to wherever you were."

Ganyu wrinkled her nose. "Did you know you could do that?"

"Um," Xiao replied again, the most eloquent yaksha alive. "I mean... Someone in my past told me that I could, and then I actually pulled it off a while ago, and then I did it again now..." He blinked again. How *had* he done that? "I probably need practice, though. I don't really know how it happened."

"Oh." Ganyu still looked confused, but she nodded as if she understood.

He shook his head slightly. "Do you want to talk about what happened to you? What led to you calling for me?" He asked her, crossing his legs beneath him and sitting more comfortably on the stone ground.

Ganyu bit her lip. "Now, thinking back, I was probably overreacting, I mean, thank you for coming, but I also probably could have handled it by myself."

Xiao rested his elbow on his knee and his chin in his hand. He kept his eyes on the stone ground. "You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

"It's just..." Ganyu looked around them, even though they were still seated in this alcove behind a stone lion and there was no one around at all. "I don't want to sound ungrateful to Rex Lapis. I know that every decision he makes is for the best of all of Liyue, and he wouldn't have made me a secretary if he didn't think it was good for the nation, but now I'm here again and I'm working for the Qixing again and it's a lot of work... Not that I'm not grateful!" Her hands flew to the cords of her Vision.

"You're a qilin," Xiao mused. "You're literally a magical illuminated beast. Why do you have to work for humans?"

She stared at him. "You're a yaksha. You're supposed to independently protect your own turf. Why are you an adeptus?"

He grinned. "Fair."

She moved her hair over her shoulder, combing through the ends of it with her fingertips. "Regardless, I'm half human."

"And I have a contract."

"Yes, well, so do I."

"Then...?" Xiao straightened up again, trying to show her that he was listening. "You have a clear place in this world, so what is wrong?"

Ganyu sighed, leaning back against the base of the stone lion. Her hands made little motions of

finality as she spoke. “I feel like I don’t fit in with the humans. I have spent the last thousand years trying to help the adepti, serving Rex Lapis as a mid-tier warrior, and I feel as if I remember nothing about human life. And now there’s a new city, and there’s new Qixing, and I don’t know them and they don’t know me, and I’m trying to make wise decisions like Rex Lapis does, but I feel like the more I try to do that the more I get overwhelmed and fail. Honestly, I only just got adjusted to being with the adepti. It’s as if before I was too human, and now I’m too adepti, and as I get busier and busier here, I don’t think I’ll even be able to step out anymore without people staring at me because I don’t look like a normal human, and then I’ll just panic —”

She looked away from Xiao, and he could hear her teeth grinding.

He shouldn’t have asked.

Against his will, his memory reached back to the last year, when he’d first been forced to meditate through his stress, and his old master’s voice echoed in his ears.

“Tell me about your happy place. Give me a list of the things that you like.”

Xiao winced, shaking his head to clear the memory. “Ganyu,” he said softly, and she turned to look at him. “Do you have a favorite place?”

It was startling how quickly she brightened. Her eyes lit up with excitement. “I do! There’s this lovely little hill in Dihua Marsh with a ginkgo tree on top of it, and I can see every set of mountains from it, and silk flowers grow in abundance all around it.” She was smiling when she looked at him. “Do you want me to take you there?”

He couldn’t help but smile back, genuinely this time. “I would love that.”

◇ ◇ ◇

They walked north from Dunyu and Cuijue Slope for the better part of the afternoon, talking about trivial things for as long as they could, and Xiao learned as much as he could about her.

She loved food, but she was also vegan, and her favorite thing to eat was Qingxin (but she secretly loved Sweet Flowers). She loved the smell of glaze lilies. She named every dog that she came across in Liyue. She was a fantastic secretary, and also strangely ditzy for one that was such a good secretary.

She did not ask a lot of questions, but neither did he, and Xiao found himself content and comfortable with the periodic silences between them. The sun was starting to set, and Xiao was feeling a little tired from speaking the most he’d had in what felt like weeks.

Still, though, with Ganyu, the silence wasn’t awkward, and the time seemed to go quickly.

It was nice.

It was refreshing.

Where time had crawled before, now it actually moved.

“Hey,” Ganyu said, breaking the quiet between them. “Bringing me down from the panic attack... Where did you learn how to do that?”

“Mm.” Xiao hummed, looking up at the soft sky. “Someone from my past taught me. I basically do it daily. Just being conscious of my own breathing helps me to keep my head clear.”

Ganyu frowned. "I feel like I've been talking a lot, when you have so much to say and so many worse problems than I do, but you never talk about what happened and I don't want to make you, but I just need to know..." She hesitated. "You get panic attacks? And you're okay?"

Xiao exhaled deeply. "Yes. But I can handle it, it's really not too different from what you just experienced. But I can bring myself down from it." *There are other moments where I just shut off all emotions completely. But that's fine. She doesn't need to know about that.* "I'm okay, Ganyu." He smiled.

For a moment, the only sounds were his boots and her heels against the path and the occasional ding of Ganyu's bell. Xiao only now realized that the crunchy gravel had transformed into soft grass and springy earth under their feet.

"I never said this, but I'm really sorry for your loss," she said, so quietly that Xiao almost didn't hear her. "I know it's a lot and we're far from each other but I want to be there for you."

"Thank you." Xiao nodded slightly. "And apparently I can teleport, so we'll never be too far from each other."

"Wow," Ganyu remarked at normal volume. "Then why couldn't we just teleport here?" She spread her arms around her, and Xiao took in the sights of Dihua Marsh.

"I will definitely need to figure out the mechanics of that later," he grinned. "Is this the spot?"

Ganyu didn't respond, choosing to run up the hill ahead and sit herself neatly at the foot of the ginkgo tree, patting the grass beside her.

Xiao followed, taking a moment to look over at the sun setting in the West over what he recognized as Mount Aocang. The sky was exactly the colors of Ganyu's eyes, purple on top and gold on the horizon, and the air was fresh and sweet-scented with silk flowers. "This is a nice place," he said, running his fingers against the smooth bark of the tree. "I see why it's your favorite."

"Yes," Ganyu smiled, lowering her gaze. Her eyelashes brushed her cheekbones. "The sunrises and sunsets here are like a dream. I know that people usually like to watch the sun in action from somewhere very high up, but seeing it from behind the mountains is a totally different experience, and more pleasant if you ask me." She pointed excitedly as the gold and purple quickly faded into a pink glow over Mount Aocang. "Isn't that beautiful? It's just as beautiful in the mornings, over there looking at Dragonspine. It really looks like a crown, and the sun fits right in the slots between peaks."

Xiao sat and leaned back against the trunk of the tree. "You must come here often, to know that so well."

She blushed, and Xiao felt his heart flutter. "I do."

"Then think of this place whenever you feel the panic settling in," he told her. "Think of the things that you like here, and what you like about it, and it should help at least a little. If that doesn't work, it helps to start listing things that you hear or smell or see."

Ganyu looked like she was taking mental notes. "Thank you."

Or you could call for me again, he wanted to say, but he didn't.

He picked at the blades of grass around him, and they sat and basked in each other's company as the sun disappeared and the night stretched across the world, revealing each tiny pinprick of

starlight in the fabric of the universe.

“Ha,” Ganyu laughed softly all of a sudden, and Xiao turned to her. “Xiao, do you remember what I said to you when we first met?”

He grinned. “Yes, I actually do,” he responded faux-thoughtfully. “You asked me if I needed help with my vajra.”

Ganyu blinked. “I did?”

“Yes!” Xiao laughed, turning his head to the side to look at her more directly. “I was lost in thought, and you said, ‘do you need help?’ and I said, ‘what,’ and I was so sure you would think I was an idiot after that.”

“Oh my archons.” Ganyu clicked her tongue. “I completely forgot about that. You were just holding it!”

Xiao laughed again, actually doubling over at Ganyu’s genuineness, patting her back to alleviate some of her awkwardness.

She blinked at him again, sunset eyes full of wonder. “Has anyone ever told you that you have a lovely laugh?”

Ah. “Everyone says that, actually.” He cleared his throat, realizing how self-centered that sounded, and was quick to change the subject. “But what were you thinking of? What did you think you said to me when we first met?”

Ganyu beamed, falling backwards on the grass and allowing her beautiful icy blue hair to fall into a neat wave beside her. “I told you that if you lie on the grass, you can feel the heartbeat of the world!”

Xiao scooted forwards and fell back onto the grass, letting the softness of the earth shape itself around him. Grass rustled by his ears and tickled his skin. He could feel his own heartbeat, sense the natural Geo and Dendro energy of the earth itself, and identify Ganyu’s presence and Cryo aura beside him.

He didn’t feel the heartbeat of the world.

He was strangely disappointed.

“Who told you about this?” He asked her.

“Rex Lapis!” She answered brightly. “He told me when I was a very small child. I liked to sleep on the grass, so one time he asked me what I was doing and if I was listening to the heartbeat of the world.” She tilted her face away, and Xiao knew she was blushing. “He was probably joking at the time, but it stuck with me, even a thousand years later.”

Xiao smiled, sitting back up and brushing bits of grass out of his hair. “You really respect him.”

“I do.” Ganyu brushed her arms through the grass. “I very much care about what he thinks of me. I know that he’s known me since I was a baby, but he is my Archon, and I respect him more than anyone else in the world.”

“Even Cloud Retainer?” Xiao joked.

“Yes, even Cloud Retainer!” Ganyu insisted, turning her head sharply to look at Xiao. “Ages ago, I was three minutes late to the Rite of Descension, and Rex Lapis had already come down and everyone was waiting for someone from the Qixing to address him because I was late. And then I was scolded for being late, but I really wanted to make sure that...” She turned away again, mumbling under her breath.

Ha. “Make sure that what?”

Ganyu grumbled a bit. “... That my outfit wasn’t the same as the previous year’s.”

Xiao burst out laughing, and Ganyu flushed again. “Do you really think Rex Lapis cares about that? I feel like he would mind more that you were three minutes late.”

“He didn’t mind at all!” Ganyu declared as she sat up and crossed her legs, turning until she was sitting directly in front of Xiao, their knees just a millimeter apart. “I knew he wouldn’t mind, but I wanted to make sure I looked presentable, and it was only three minutes!”

“You’re so funny,” Xiao noted affectionately, looking upwards to look at the sky again.

“So are you!” Ganyu exclaimed, but she also leaned back to stare at the stars and the steadily climbing moon. “You are somehow both exactly what I thought you would be like, but also different.”

“Hm?” Xiao kept his eyes on the green and purple streak of cosmic energy over his head, wiling his heart to be still. “What do you mean?”

“I mean...” Ganyu reached out and tapped her fingers softly on his leg. “I thought you would be so much colder than you are, but you’re so kind, and your soul is so gentle. Most of the adepti look at you and all they see is how powerful you are, but I see you now.”

Xiao finally looked back at her.

True to Ganyu’s personality, she immediately flustered and started overcorrecting. “I’m not trying to say that I know all of you, or I understand all of you all of a sudden! I know that there is so much that you have been through that I don’t even know about, and emotions you feel that you haven’t shared with me, but all I’m trying to say is that I know better now, and I still really want to be around you.” She picked at her Vision cords and stared resolutely at the grass between them.

Xiao suppressed a laugh. “I feel that way about you too, given the fact that you’re both what I thought you would be like and also different. It’s kind of nice, though, to know that The One and Only Secretary of the Qixing is an overthinking, panicking ball of anxiety, just like me.”

“Just like you,” Ganyu echoed, a little ruefully.

“It’s okay, though,” Xiao assured her. “I’m glad. It means that you understand me.”

The moon had risen higher in the sky as they’d spoken, and the early summer air was getting a little colder. The night was dark blue and very still.

The day had flown by, faster than the last weeks, faster than what seemed like the entirety of his life in his control.

Time really had no meaning.

“There are a lot of things happening right now,” Xiao said softly. “I think I need to get through all

the events of my life before moving forward. I don't think I've fully processed anything, at all. But..." He breathed all the way in and all the way out. "I'm really glad to have met you twice like this. Once back when you asked me if I needed help with my vajra, and once again today. I feel like we've both met whole different versions of each other in just one day."

Ganyu's eyes met his, and she giggled. "It's nice to meet you, yaksha."

Xiao smiled, leaning forward as if greeting her. "It's nice to meet you too, qilin-human. You're out quite late. Don't you need rest?"

"I do," Ganyu responded promptly, "but I nap every day at noon."

He laughed again, music that filled the night air. "See, we've only just met and I'm already learning new things about you."

"That's lovely." Ganyu smiled, enchanting and refreshing like rain over Minlin. She leaned forward to meet him, pressing her forehead gently to his; her hair was like silk on the side of his face, and her breath smelled like Qingxin petals.

He loved Qingxin.

"Hello, nice to meet you," she said quietly, voice just slightly tinged with nerves, and he could feel her words on his skin. "My name is Ganyu, and I really like you."

Xiao exhaled a laugh through his nose, feeling a sense of peace and assurance that he hadn't realized he'd been missing for weeks.

Terrible things were happening. The war had just ended, and when the sun rose, Xiao would have a contract to return to, a family of yakshas to comfort and mourn with, and his own bundle of emotional baggage to process.

Not a bundle. Maybe more like a meteorite.

Or a mountain.

He still had his own mountain of emotional baggage to process.

For this minute, though.

Just for this one minute.

He could *let* time be meaningless.

"Hello," he whispered back. "My name is Xiao, and I really like you too."

Chapter End Notes

ew romance

TL;DR, No one is handling the death of the baby yakshas well, Xiao doesn't think he has the right to be sad because he didn't actually know Antheas and Somnius that well; Xiao teleports to Ganyu who is working in Liyue Harbor now and talks her down from

a panic attack, and they kind of awkwardly hang out all day and talk to each other while more or less agreeing to handle whatever feelings e x t r e m e l y s l o w l y cuz no one is ready for this. not even me. yecch i don't like writing feel-y good-y give me angst

They can't be a perfect couple okay, xiaolumi is the perfect couple xiaolumi forever but also wow we love our awkward introverted overthinking anxious boi and girl. Anyway.

We are about to hit a FEVER PITCH OF ANGST, literally there are no good moments UNTIL LUMINE SHOWS UP. Good luck with that everyone, watch me cry every day trying to get these out. Seriously. If the first three chapters were the buildup to Zhui, consider everything since he's been free a buildup to this point.

hi i am indertia and i am here to rip out and step on your heart, in every way that i can <3

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I Will Be Right Here

Chapter Summary

*When your heart feels heavy
Let this song carry you away
When the darkness comes
Just know that I'll be here
Always watching you
I will be right here.*

Chapter Notes

tw; PTSD/trauma/flashbacks

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The yakshas finally reunited a few nights later.

They didn't plan it. It wasn't so much a reunion as it was that Xiao just eventually returned to Jueyan Karst and expected everyone else would be there too.

Xiao had been practicing teleporting, closer and closer to Jueyan Karst from Mount Aocang, trying to better understand the mechanics of this ability. He could be very precise in short bursts before pressure would eventually build behind his eyes and ears and he'd have to stop and take a break. He still hadn't figured out exactly how he managed long-distance teleportation, but he had made it to Jueyan Karst with his head intact!

Xiao allowed himself a small smile of triumph. He'd managed to do at least this much. If he just thought hard enough about the exact spot he wanted to be in, he could will himself to appear there. It would probably take a little more practice to get this ability exactly where he wanted it, but for now, it couldn't possibly hurt to take some pride in this one accomplishment. The next time he saw Ganyu, he'd have something to show her—

He heard Menogias from a distance even before he saw her, shouting. Angry. Loud.

All at once, his chest hurt and his breath hitched. Xiao crouched down and pressed his back against a tree, wishing he could disappear before the others arrived, closing his eyes and breathing as evenly as he could handle as Menogias's voice came closer.

"You don't even care that we have a contract! The number of demons has *increased* since Osial was defeated, and I'm the only one doing anything about them! I've said this since the beginning, *yakshas don't separate!* No one ever listened to me!" Menogias yelled.

"Of course we respect our contracts!" Bosacius was clearly trying his best to calm her down. "And we weren't trying to make you and Bonanus do all the work! It's just been a really difficult time for everyone."

“Oh, please. Don’t try to pretend you’re as hurt as I am. No one even cared about Antheas and Somnius except me and Pervases!”

The other yakshas’ energy came closer, and Xiao bowed his head even lower. Breathe. In. Out.

Fighting amongst the yakshas wasn’t necessarily a new thing. Xiao had memories of their fights in his life before his captivity, usually Bonanus and Indarias debating one principle or another, or Menogias and Bosacius bickering about something wildly trivial like who got to eat the last piece of crystal shrimp, but this... This was different.

“Just because you do not see us mourning does not mean we are not doing so at all, and just because you believe you feel more pain than we do does not mean that the rest of us feel no loss.” Bonanus’s voice rumbled as it usually did, but there was an audible undercurrent of irritation and weariness.

Xiao tensed. He had never felt such impatient fury and waves of near-deliberate misunderstanding before. After the death of Guizhong, Rex Lapis had said something similar to Xiao about pain being relative, but he had said it so gently and kindly and *empathetically* — unlike Bonanus, who almost sounded like he was intentionally trying to invalidate Menogias’s words.

“Tch.” Menogias clicked her tongue in frustration. “No one understands me.”

“That’s not true.” Indarias finally spoke out.

Xiao let out a tiny sigh of relief. Indarias was always the yakshas’ voice of reason and comforting presence.

Unfortunately, it was too early to be relieved.

“I know. It’s not. *Somnius* understood me! Too bad he’s dead.”

Menogias’s words dripped with venom and resentment, but still she sounded sadder than she sounded angry.

“Hey.” Bosacius and Bonanus snapped at the same time.

“No one understands my dark humor.” Menogias continued. A lilt of insanity crept into her tone. “Oh, wait. Antheas did! Too bad she’s dead, too.”

A pulse of electricity sent static waves through Xiao’s hair, and he could hear sparks flying. “Menogias, *stop it!*”

“What?” Menogias protested. “It’s true! It’s fine! I’m just stating facts!”

“You’re upsetting Pervases.” Bonanus spoke sharply.

Silence.

“*Excuse me?*”

The bark of the tree scraped sharply against Xiao’s back as he instinctively straightened into a defensive stance, head spinning a little and dark spots clouding his eyes from the sudden rush.

The yakshas came to a stop just a few meters behind Xiao. He knew that they could sense his presence, could have sensed him a while ago, but he couldn’t bring himself to come out from behind the tree. He could imagine Menogias’s flaming, manic yellow eyes, Bonanus and

Bosacius's solid faces, Indarias uselessly fluttering her hands in an attempt to calm everyone down, and Pervases standing mute.

Breathe.

Menogias only increased in volume. "Do you think you can protect him from the immensely glaring fact that Somnius and Antheas are dead? They're dead, and nothing can change that, and *I loved them too!*" Her voice broke on the last words, transforming into a twisted sing-song. "*They were mine too, and now they're gone, gone, gone, gone...*"

"Meno," Indarias tried. Grass rustled under her feet as she took a step forward. "We're all trying our best, okay? We're all trying to get used to life without them. Of course we have a job to do, but —"

"Oh, my archons, can you just *shut up?*"

Xiao flinched.

The Pyro yaksha was full-on shouting now. "Why do you always act like you always know the right thing to say or do? You don't understand anything! You never even asked me or Pervases what we needed! What if we don't *want* to talk about it, hm? *What if we just want to be alone?*" Thermal energy radiated from her body, audibly scorching the ground below her. "You might be a healer, but you can't fix this, Indarias!"

Indarias took a sharp breath in. "You're right. You're right, I can't fix this! But what exactly do you want us to do? We can't *do* anything now. We're going to get back to our jobs, to our contracts, to slaying demons forever like yakshas are supposed to do, and none of that is going to bring them back, Meno, so what do you want me to do?"

"I DON'T KNOW!"

Xiao immediately crouched back down, pressing his hands over his ears, bracing himself against the wave of heat that burst off of Menogias. Hydro energy pressed against Xiao's back, protecting him from the heat, Indarias's attempt to protect him and the other yakshas from the Pyro power.

"I don't know! I don't know! *I don't know!*" Menogias screamed over and over, fully manic now. "I don't know what you can do, but Indarias, the least you can do is *acknowledge* them! What's different now, huh? What's different from when we all thought that Alatus died? *Why are you just fucking pretending that it didn't happen now?*"

Silence. Xiao's blood roared in his ears.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

The tense quiet dragged on far longer than it should have.

Xiao's hands shook. He forced himself to stand up, turning out from behind the tree to see the damage behind him.

The yakshas had all backed a distance away from Menogias, who was fully engulfed in flames, her yellow eyes crazy and wide. The closest side of each tree was slightly scorched, and the grass under Menogias for a meter around was on fire.

Indarias drenched the grass with water. "We didn't *know*, for a *fact*, that he was dead! We had to keep looking! This is different, Menogias, you have to know that!"

The yakshas only stared at each other.

Then Menogias summoned her mask and placed it on her face. Accelerated power shot through her limbs, and her body convulsed as she lifted off the ground.

“What the hell are you doing?!” Bosacius ran forward, and the smell of his arm hair burning filled the air as he grasped Menogias’s wrist, fighting to bring her back down. “Meno, stop it!”

“The voices make more damn sense than you do!” Menogias screamed. Her ultimate energy vastly overpowered the Electro yaksha, who was still trying his hardest to avoid being burned from her skin. “Get off, Bo! You’re worthless! You’re trash!” She yanked her arm away from him, and Bosacius stumbled backwards. *“I hate you!”*

Xiao bit his lip hard enough to taste blood. Somnius wasn’t there to talk her down. He doubted she was at a point where she could have heard him anyway.

He closed his eyes.

He felt Bonanus shaking the ground as he moved to help Bosacius, could sense the firebolts shooting off in all directions, could almost hear the voices that Menogias was parroting, could almost feel the karmic bondage... His hand slipped under his gauntlet, and he pressed his nails into his wrist.

This isn’t happening, it’s not, it’s not, there’s nothing wrong, this is your family, they’ll figure it out, they’ll figure it out, DO NOT THINK ABOUT IT—

“The Pyro Regisvine is breaking out.”

Xiao barely heard Pervases speak, and even then he was positive he had heard wrong. “What?”

Pervases wiped his eyes and cleared his throat, loud enough that the other yakshas ceased their scuffle and turned towards him. “The Pyro Regisvine. It’s breaking out of the cavern it usually grows in.”

“What in Teyvat?” Menogias’s voice was shrill, but her mask disappeared off her face and rematerialized at her hip. Xiao noticed with a wince that she had burned the tassels off of her earrings.

Bonanus frowned. “After Osial’s pinning, there are more demons. We know this. I suppose it makes sense that the most amount of demons in this vicinity are possessing the Pyro Regisvine, since it is really the only life around.”

“Other than the Primo Geovishaps,” Pervases corrected quietly. “But the Primo Geovishaps are more... Self-aware... Than the Regisvines.”

Indarias made a frustrated sound. “Have we ever even fought a Regisvine before? What are we supposed to do?”

“Ha!” Menogias sneered. It wasn’t a good look on her. “If we had just obeyed our contracts and killed the demons when we were supposed to, then we wouldn’t have to fight a Regisvine at all!”

Xiao shook his head, speaking before anyone could respond to her. “I can do it, Indarias. I could do it with just the two of us. If you could just use Hydro on the Regisvine’s corolla, and maybe heal me, then I could handle it.”

“*What?*” Menogias shrieked. Xiao winced and covered his ears again. “You expect us to let you go alone? You think you can handle a legion of demons possessing a Regisvine, *alone?*”

I know I can.

He raised and lowered one shoulder.

“Don’t shrug at me!” Menogias whirled around. “Indarias, are you going to let this happen?”

The Hydro yaksha laced and unlaced her fingers. She did not look up from the ground. “Yes.”

“*WHAT?*”

Bonanus folded his arms. “Do you have a better idea, Menogias? Do you have experience fighting a Regisvine? A Regisvine of your own element, nonetheless? What exactly do you plan to do to it? You cannot actually fight fire with fire.”

“We can at least watch from the cavern entrance, right, Pervases?” Bosacius patted Menogias’s shoulder.

Menogias growled. “You expect me to stand back and watch Xiao and Indarias fight alone?”

“You would get in the way,” Bonanus said firmly.

“It’s still a plant,” Pervases offered quietly before Menogias could snap back. “It’s got at least a little bit of Dendro energy in it. I know you haven’t even been killing Dendro samachurls. Are you at all in a place where you can even consider destroying Dendro energy without thinking about Somnius?”

Xiao tuned out the ensuing conversation, focusing on himself. He’d need to put the mask on — probably for a long time — but if he did, that meant that could take out the Regisvine in less time. The only thing that had held him back in the past was the Regisvines corolla, and taking too long for his master’s liking —

Don’t think about that —

— but with help and healing from Indarias, he’d be fine. He’d be fine! Once the Regisvine collapsed from getting its corolla destroyed, defeating it would be easy, he just needed to avoid the flames, which was easy as long as he didn’t get too close, and he needed to prepare himself mentally to wear the mask, *archons*, he could use a dream right now —

Indarias touched his elbow, and Xiao startled. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” *No.* Xiao’s head spun with the thoughts of having to deal with the voices of the mask. “Will you go first? I need to... Prepare myself.”

She furrowed her eyebrows in concern, but she turned to walk in the direction of the Regisvine’s caverns. “Come on,” she called to the other yakshas.

If they knew what he was going to do, they didn’t show it.

Xiao teleported a short distance away and found a few bands of hilichurls.

He fell immediately into the Dream Trawler. It didn’t even take any effort.

The hilichurls cried as he took their dreams. They weren’t even possessed. They were just dancing,

digging, and living their lives.

Their dreams were sweet, and exactly what Xiao needed.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Are you *sure* this is good enough?!” Indarias shouted from the edge of the cavern where she’d retreated to after destroying the corolla, standing with the other yakshas as they watched Xiao slash at the roots of the Pyro Regisvine.

WORTHLESS USELESS INFERIOR TRASH PATHETIC MISERABLE WRETCH, HATE
YOU HATE YOU HATE HATE HATE —

Xiao gritted his teeth, not bothering to answer Indarias aloud. She could see for herself that the Regisvine was dying under Xiao’s jade blade.

He leaped up high again, turning in the air to crash down on the vine’s head, sending Anemo spears upwards in all directions. The vine convulsed, hissing as the Hydro Swirl effect put out its smaller fires. *Not much longer.*

“How much longer?” Indarias shouted again, a little more anxiously.

WE HATE YOU WE HATE YOU WE HATE YOU

Xiao gasped for air, dismissing his mask, and felt his flesh knit back together after being pulled apart by his own power. “Just a little bit.” He drew back as the vine rose upright, rolling backwards to gain some distance.

The voices were manageable, especially with his mind buzzing with dreams. The Regisvine was close to death. Xiao himself had avoided being burned for this long, even with the air hot and thick and dry to breathe. As long as he could just keep it that way for a little longer —

“*Menogias, STOP!!!*”

Bosacius’s shout cut across the entire cavern, echoing and bouncing repeatedly off the walls.

Xiao whipped around.

Menogias was running across the cavern floor, leaping over the blockades that Pervases and Bonanus must have been summoning from the ground to stop her, chanting over and over, “Somnius, Somnius, Somnius, Somnius...”

“That’s not Somnius, Meno, *stop!*” Pervases ran after her, tripping over his own blocks on the way. “*Please!*”

The distraction had cost Xiao a few precious seconds. He turned back just as the Regisvine slammed its head down, sending a column of fire his way.

He tucked into himself and rolled to the side just a moment too late, and flames ripped across his right arm, burning his skin and bubbling his flesh into sickly yellow blisters.

Xiao’s vision immediately clouded over.

Suddenly he was right back where he was years ago, clinging helplessly to the smoking iron gauntlet of a sick and twisted master, on fire from the inside out.

“No, no no no no no no no...” Xiao forgot the Regisvine, forgot Menogias, *I can't focus I can't breathe please, please don't burn me anymore it hurts, it hurts, it hurts it hurts it hurts PLEASE NO NO NO*

“Xiao, stay with us!” Indarias screamed. Hydro energy, healing and soothing and cool, washed over him, and he felt the pain and panic subside. “Please, get Menogias!”

Xiao's heart fought its way out of the wall of his chest. He shook his head, forcing himself to pay attention to his surroundings.

Breathe. Focus. Now!

Menogias had walked almost directly under the flaming leaves of the Regisvine and had raised her arms towards it. “Somnius,” she whispered.

There was not even a hint of sanity in her eyes.

“Menogias!” Indarias was still screaming.

Teleport in and grab Menogias and teleport back out it's so simple it'll be so simple the fire won't hurt you it's not going to burn you it's NOT

But it is.

It is.

I can't do it.

“XIAO!” Pervases, Bosacius, and Indarias were all screaming, Bonanus still calling up waves of Geo to try to pull Menogias back from the range of the Regisvine, pressure, pressure, pressure, *go! Save her! You did it before now do it NOW*

The flames were brighter than ever. Pyro users were more resilient to fire than others, but Menogias could burn.

Menogias could die.

“Somnius, it's Somnius!” She kept saying. Her hair caught fire, and Indarias screamed. “Somnius, I miss you! I never thought I'd see you again! You won't leave me again, will you? You'll stay here with me, won't you?”

The Regisvine reared its head, preparing to crash down on Menogias.

Xiao fought to move, to just move, to dash, to do *anything*, but his body refused to obey. His hands shook, right hand clenched around his spear, his breath and heartbeat lost to the scorching hot air.

This can't be happening. I can't possibly be frozen in terror right now. I can't be watching the moments before my sister dies. This can't be happening.

Not to Somnius. Not to Antheas.

Not to Menogias.

This is all my fault.

Menogias tilted her head back, looking up at the Regisvine, hands still outstretched as if receiving a

gift, hair curling in blazes behind her.

The Regisvine slammed into her once.

Twice.

Three times.

Menogias collapsed.

Menogias, who had wanted to name him “Bellus.”

Menogias, who taught him how to shoot a bow.

Menogias, who offered to spar with him when he was still learning how to use his mask.

Menogias, who saved him from Osial at the front lines of the Archon War.

Menogias, who snored when she slept, shared lotus crisps with him, hated to sing, and always fought on and by his side.

Menogias. His sister.

Her energy faded from Xiao’s awareness.

Her body crumbled into ashes.

◇ ◇ ◇

Once again, the yaksha splintered from each other.

This time, Xiao knew, they were all off fighting demons.

◇ ◇ ◇

He didn’t think that anything could ever hurt more than being burned from the inside out.

Now he would gladly withstand years of physical pain to escape the hurt that was losing Meno.

◇ ◇ ◇

All Xiao did for days was eat dreams.

◇ ◇ ◇

If time had no meaning before, it had even less meaning now.

◇ ◇ ◇

He was lost in a haze of hilichurl desires, wishing for something stronger, wishing he had the freedom to have a human's shade, forgetting a little more of his pain with every sweet, silk-textured dream he tore from both possessed and unpossessed alike.

◇ ◇ ◇

When Xiao finally stopped and stood still, unsteady on his feet, exhausted from days of constant fighting and Dream Trawling, the sick and twisted reality of his life set in.

Why did he think that dreams would help? Why did he think that Ganyu, or Guizhong, or even Rex Lapis, or anyone could fix his problems? Everything that made him feel better was impermanent. Everything disappeared at some point.

Even Jing had disappeared from Xiao's life after the Archon War. He didn't even know if she was alive or dead.

In the end, her philosophy had been right — nothing could last forever, and nothing was meant to last forever.

He couldn't even cry.

Xiao pressed the heels of his hands into his dry eyes. He needed more dreams.

The moon was bright overhead. Xiao hadn't noticed it was night.

He also hadn't noticed that he had chased the latest pack of hilichurls all the way to the mouth of the cave where the Pyro Regisvine usually spawned.

In mere moments, the hilichurls were reduced to a pile of broken masks on the ground, and their dreams were swirling with pleasant memories in Xiao's mind as he stepped into the cavern of the Regisvine.

Indarias was inside, sitting on the outermost edge of the circle, legs crossed, Hydro energy protecting her from the waves of heat rolling off of the plant. Her light-colored bodice and blue hair contrasted sharply with the glowing red of the cavern around her. She had watched in painful silence when he finished it off the last time, not that long ago, and she was quiet now as well.

Neither of them blamed the Regisvine itself for Menogias's death. They both knew that it had been the consequences of karma and insanity that killed her.

And yet, the silent agreement to destroy was louder than any word they could have exchanged when they both advanced towards the Regisvine.

Indarias destroyed each corolla easily with her Hydro sword, refreshing Xiao in between dodges and rolls, while Xiao cut down the plant with almost no effort. It was pathetically easy, considering how afraid of the vine they had been before then. Xiao only needed to summon his mask once, and it barely affected him at all.

The karmic voices, dampened by dreams, were nothing compared to what Xiao had been telling himself all these days.

In no time, the Regisvine was dead on the cavern floor and disappearing into shimmers of sparks that blew away in the air.

Xiao was panting from the effort. He released his spear and sat down in the center of the cave, tilting his head upwards where Menogias must have been looking when she died. The cavern opened up above them in a beautiful patch of dark blue night sky, bright with starlight. He lowered his back to the ground, lying flat on the warm stone, staring blankly at the stars.

Indarias, unprompted, lowered herself to sit on the stone next to him.

It was blessedly quiet for a moment, and Xiao's breathing returned to normal.

"Xiao..." Indarias's voice was quiet and calming as water, just as he'd always known it. "I know you probably don't want to talk, but I need to know... What did you do to those hilichurls outside?"

He closed his eyes, taking in a deep breath all the way to the bottom of his lungs and releasing it slowly. "I was eating their dreams."

"Oh." A pause. "You... You eat dreams?"

"I've been eating them." Xiao cleared his throat; his voice was sore and horribly low from underuse. "It's really... It's the only way I haven't gone insane yet. I've been addicted for a very long time." He swallowed, suddenly wanting water, or anything refreshing.

Snow, with gushing oil.

Snow. Or more dreams.

The unspoken truth was that if he'd given Menogias dreams, he could have saved her.

Silence.

He had to ask her. "Are you angry?"

Indarias didn't respond, and Xiao opened his eyes.

She was absently floating a few droplets of water above her fingers, her eyes fixed on the sky. “No,” she answered quietly. “I’m not angry. Things have never been more different than they are now. And I understand that now.”

Xiao nodded. He had spent the last couple of years or so trying to adjust to a new normal. Now it seemed that every day was another adjustment. Nothing was permanent, ever.

Except karma, he thought bitterly.

Except death.

Except love.

Love.

Through the haze of hilichurl thoughts and dreams, Xiao sighed. “Indarias?”

“Yes.”

“You know how the demonic is the shadow of the divine?”

Indarias closed her eyes tightly, like she was holding back tears. “Yes.”

“Rex Lapis told me...” he cleared his throat again. “He told me that if we speak well of the dead, by speaking good memories about them, we make it easier for them to find freedom, and we make it easier for ourselves to... To be okay.” He couldn’t bring himself to look at her, and he shuffled his feet against the floor before speaking. “I remember way back when Guili city was being made, before we even knew it had a name, Menogias took me to go see the construction. She got me black-back perch stew, and it was so spicy that I choked, and then she was laughing so hard at me that she also choked.”

Indarias smiled wanly. “I don’t know if you know this, but she was actually the one who asked every archon in existence for a very strong, but also very little brother she could poke fun at, but who could handle her teasing.”

Despite himself, Xiao cracked a smile, too. “So it’s Meno’s fault that I’m so short?”

“Exactly.” Indarias leaned back on her hands, starting to relax a little more. “She was so happy when you appeared.”

Xiao hadn’t noticed that there was a knot in his chest until it finally started to warm up and loosen. “I remember when she first taught me how to shoot, she let me use her bow and I almost set the Karst on fire.”

“You’re not a Pyro yaksha!” Indarias chided. “I told her it was ridiculous. It wasn’t even the first, or the second, or the third time she almost burned down the Karst.” She smiled again, a little more genuinely. “She and I were born around the same time. I don’t remember life before she appeared. I never thought I’d have to be without her.”

Xiao let his eyes fall shut again. “Pervases has never known a life without any of you. Pain is relative, but everyone is hurting to some extent.”

Indarias hummed softly in response. She released some Hydro energy into the air. The fresh scent of a rushing river cut through the smoke and ash in the air, cooling Xiao’s skin and soothing his lungs when he inhaled.

“Indarias...” He tilted his head to look at her.

“Hm?”

“Can you tell me some stories about Somnius and Antheas? I really wish I had known them better.”

Indarias took a deep breath. She pulled her legs towards her chest, sitting the same way Xiao usually did, keeping her eyes looking up. “Somnius is... Somnius was always the sweet one, even as he was blank and blunt. With him, what you see is pretty much what you get.” She chuckled once, and Xiao knew that her memories were fond. “He would have done anything for any one of us, and he was so creative, and always the first one to suggest something new that no one else had thought to try. He was always dreaming, so we named him Somnius. He tried to be cool and mysterious, you know —” she covered her right eye with her hand, and Xiao tried not to laugh — “with the green hair, and the earring, but honestly? He *was* cool. And he *was* mysterious.”

Xiao nodded. He had always thought that Somnius was kind and airily sweet, even if they hadn’t been close. “And Antheas?”

“Mm.” Indarias thoughtfully rested her cheek on her hand. “Antheas is... Was sweet in a different way. She’d never let you tell her that she was sweet. And if you said you loved her, she’d either say it back very quietly, or very begrudgingly, or not at all. She appeared first, before Somnius and Pervases, and she always took it upon herself to be an older authority figure to them, even though she was only a few years older.”

“Ah.” Xiao shrugged. “I did notice that she was always fairly intense in her relationships.”

“Yes.” Indarias finally turned her head to meet Xiao’s eye, a lilt of excitement highlighting her voice. “Antheas has always been aggressively caring, since the moment she appeared. The first thing she did was frostbite a field of flowers, and Menogias thought it would be funny to name her Antheas. Such a delicate and beautiful name for one so full of aggression and fighting energy! She never needed a mentor; she was always combative and independent, the complete opposite of...”

Her voice trailed off awkwardly.

It was okay. Xiao knew what she was planning to say.

“... The complete opposite of Alatus.” He finished.

Indarias dropped her head onto her arms. “Yes.”

Xiao swallowed and blinked, pressing his lips together.

There was a long, long, long silence while they tried to think of something to say.

A lizard scuttled somewhere in the far corners of the cavern. Cooling wind, able to sink with the absence of the Regisvine’s heat source, swirled along the walls with a soft blowing sound. Xiao swore he could hear the stars twinkle.

“Tell me about him.”

Indarias blinked. “Excuse me?”

Xiao pulled himself upright. “Tell me about Alatus. What was he like?”

Indarias blinked again, biting her lower lip and swiping the back of her hand across her eyes. She

ran one hand through her long blue hair, hair almost exactly like his own, and blinked harder before smiling at Xiao. Her blue eyes were watery, highlighted with red lines of divinity, older and sharper than Xiao remembered, but just as full of adoration as he'd ever known.

"He was beautiful," she whispered, and it was as if all the emotion she'd felt all her life had been expressed in just three words. "I first saw him on the edge of a cliff, lifted up by the wind, smiling as if he couldn't wait to exist, laughing and making the whole world bright. Even in the longest days with him, when he asked a billion questions that tired us out to the point that even Bonanus didn't want to tell him stories anymore, he would look at me with these beautiful golden eyes. And he'd smile, and he'd laugh, and even if it was night, he would fill my life with sunshine. At the end of every day, I would ask him, 'Was today a good day?' And even if he had the worst day, even if he was injured, even if he was grumpy or too hot or upset with Bosacius because he couldn't go swimming with him, he would smile." Indarias took a long, shaky breath, and Xiao felt his heart twist. "He would smile, and he would say, 'Yes, Indarias, it was a good day. I have a good life.'"

She sighed like her heart was breaking, eyes still blinking back tears.

"He would mean it," Xiao said softly.

"Oh, yes?" Indarias lifted one corner of her mouth. "Sometimes I wondered if he was putting up a face to protect me from thinking he really didn't have a good day."

"No," Xiao said firmly. "He meant it. You gave him a very good life. And he was happy. He had the best life."

She smiled at him, swiping at her eyes again. "I'm glad."

They fell quiet again.

If we speak well of the dead, if we speak good memories about them, we make it easier for them to find freedom, and we make it easier for ourselves to be okay.

Somnius. Antheas. Menogias.

And now Alatus.

"Indarias?"

"Yes?"

Xiao rested his chin on his knees, hugging his legs to his chest. "What happened to him?"

Indarias sighed, and there was another long, long silence.

"I don't really know." She sounded broken when she finally spoke. "I wish there was someone out there who knew, someone who could tell me."

"Oh."

Another long silence.

How vulnerable are you willing to be today?

This was the yaksha that raised him. The one that cut his hair to look just like hers. The one that taught him how to sing.

The one that spent two hundred years ceaselessly searching for him.

“Someone can,” he said plainly to her.

She didn’t answer.

Just how vulnerable are you willing to be today?

“Alatus was kidnapped, tortured, and killed by the Archon of Karma.” Xiao said softly. “It was painful. It was terrible. But he thought of you all the time. He sang the songs that you taught him. He knew where you were, and he wondered if you were safe. He didn’t think about very much else, because...” Xiao folded his hands in front of his legs, tucking his head over his knees. “Because you told him you would be right here.”

Zhui had broken him, had turned him into something unrecognizable, had changed his body and his future and his worldview forever. Xiao could never go back to the way he was before. Nothing could make him Alatus again, almost the same way that nothing could bring back Menogias, Somnius, or Antheas.

But Xiao was still here.

“Alatus was reborn, though. And the love that existed back then still remains now.”

Tears were freely streaming down Indarias’s cheeks now, and she fought to keep her voice steady. “Does he see me in the world he lives in now?”

“Yes,” he answered. “He will always see you.”

Indarias dissolved bitterly into her tears, crying gasping sobs that echoed in the cavern, expressing all kinds of pain and loss and sorrow with just one sound.

Xiao couldn’t bring himself to cry along with her.

Instead, he opened his mouth and sang, very quietly.

*“When your heart feels heavy
Let this song carry you away
When the darkness comes
Just know that I’ll be here
Always watching you
I will be right here.”*

He reached out and rested his hand on hers, quiet while her cries subsided.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I’m sorry it took so long to let Alatus go and to let you be here, Xiao.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t help you get the closure you needed sooner,” he murmured back. He moved closer and lowered his head onto her shoulder, nestling into Indarias’s side in a way that he hadn’t done since he’d been just a few years old. For a second, he was a baby yaksha again, hiding behind Indarias’s hair to feel safe. “Thank you for waiting for it for so long,” he whispered. “Thank you for loving Alatus.”

Indarias rested her head on his. He did not flinch away. “And I love you, Xiao.”

“I love you, too.”

The patch of sky above them was starting to lighten with the sunrise. They watched as the stars disappeared one by one and dark blue faded into soft cyan, and a new day began.

Indarias sighed, and Xiao lifted his head to look at her. “I’m going to get up now, go to Liyue Harbor, and get some lotus crisps,” she said resolutely, “so we can burn some for Menogias, Somnius, and Antheas, and Alatus. And when I come back...” She looked directly at Xiao, her soft blue eyes meeting his liquid gold, and smiled. “When I come back, I won’t feel sorry for you, and I won’t feel guilty, and I won’t be yearning for the past. When I come back and I sit down, I will be Indarias, and you will be Xiao, and we will find our Bonanus, Bosacius, and Pervases. And we will adjust to this new life together. How does that sound?”

“It’s perfect,” he answered, and he meant it.

Indarias rose to her feet, brushed dust and ash off her dress, and turned to walk out of the cavern.

“Indarias?”

She turned back again. “Yes, Xiao.”

“Was today a good day?” Xiao closed his eyes. He knew the answer.

“No.” Indarias said softly, quiet and sad. “Today was a terrible day. Many of the last few days have been the worst days. There will likely never be days as terrible as these days have been. Things are different. Things are going to continue to be different.” She exhaled slowly. “But we are still here. And it is still a good life.”

Xiao thought about all that he had gained and all that he had lost since the day he had first appeared. Nothing ever lasted.

But that did not make life unworthy of living.

When Indarias left the cavern, she was singing.

Xiao sang along.

*“When the darkness comes
Just know that I’ll be here
Always watching you
I will be right here.”*

Chapter End Notes

I love you guys <3

It's hard to churn out chapters at a quality that I'm satisfied with, so please be patient but know that I *WILL* FINISH THIS STORY. I have great things planned.

Love you guys so much <3

Twitter: @indertia_

Things Are Different

Chapter Summary

“Excuse me.”

Xiao and Bosacius jumped to their feet, but Rex Lapis waved his hand dismissively.

The archon’s eyebrows were drawn tightly together in concern, and Xiao could suddenly sense Rex Lapis’s restlessness. “Did something happen, my Lord?”

“I don’t mean to interrupt you,” he started, thoughtful and kind even in his uneasiness. “But. Have either one of you seen Ganyu in the last few hours?”

Xiao’s vision went red.

Ganyu is missing. Ganyu. Is. Missing. GANYU IS MISSING —

Chapter Notes

Announcement~:

there’s been some further establishment of the difference between gods and archons. In the past chapters (which i’ll edit at some point) i used these two terms interchangeably, but archon is used to refer to one of the Seven, and god is used to refer to any qualifying celestial being. So every archon is a god, but only seven of those gods are archons. I’ll be using the terms properly from this point forward :D

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Things were different.

Xiao’s relationship with Indarias had changed. It was a little less awkward, a little less forced, a little less dancing around each other and a lot more comfortable. Indarias had ceased to hover over Xiao’s daily life, making herself available to him without asking too many questions or demanding that he report to her on every little action. After defeating the Pyro Hypostasis together twice, she seemed to trust him more in combat, and they both subsequently became better fighters. Xiao had missed Indarias before, but now he didn’t have to worry about upsetting her or becoming anxious on her behalf.

It was nice.

Pervases had taken on a new hunger for accomplishment. Where he had been full of life and cheery optimism before, he was now withdrawn into himself, brown eyes sharp, focused, and determined. Up until that point, Pervases had primarily relied on his elemental power, and Xiao hadn’t even taken a moment to remember what weapon the Geo yaksha carried. Now Pervases’s sword was never gone from his hand. Even when the fighting was over and he was at rest, he would spend his

time swinging the sword and practicing other ways to handle it.

It was already unsettling for Pervases to be so dedicated to swordwork; it was immensely more unsettling for him to be quiet. In recent weeks, he hadn't even been speaking to Bonanus.

Bonanus hadn't changed, at least not much. There had always been a quiet sort of anger about him that had just never gone away, and now it just lingered. He and Pervases would go on excursions from time to time and fight demons together, but from what Xiao understood, they didn't speak. And when the sun rose and they eventually would return to Jueyan Karst, they stayed alert and on patrol throughout the day.

Xiao couldn't actually remember very well what his relationship with Bonanus had been like before. It couldn't have always been like this, this cold, bitterly angry refusal to interact, but Xiao never could gather up the nerve to say anything to the ancient Geo yaksha. Until now he'd been able to avoid it, and until now he'd been able to talk to at least Indarias and Bosacius.

With Bosacius, however, *everything* was different.

Sometimes he didn't want to talk at all.

Sometimes he wanted to talk and would end up shutting down or yelling or crying, saying things that cut to the bone like, "Things were just starting to go back to normal, we just got you back, we just got you back and now she's gone, they're gone, already gone."

Sometimes he seemed to forget that anything had changed and just sat like a statue, not quite asleep and not quite awake but definitely not at peace.

Xiao could sense the turmoil behind Bosacius's closed eyelids during those times.

The best thing he could do was try and sit beside the Electro yaksha, there in case Bosacius decided he wanted to talk, but the conversations were almost never productive.

Xiao was generally very good at staying still, but now his hands jumped from his Vision to the grass at his feet to his left strand of hair to the jade ring on his sleeve, never quite out of motion as he sat on the grass of Jueyan Karst. The morning was quickly intensifying into the afternoon, and the sun made Xiao feel more exposed than ever.

Bosacius sat next to him, sitting with his spine perfectly straight in a stark contrast to the generally loose posture he normally had.

"I feel nothing," he commented, monotone and flat, breaking the silence that had settled over them.

"That's okay," Xiao replied on instinct. "You can talk to me. Or Indarias. Or anyone."

"I don't *need* to talk." Bosacius snapped his head to the side, and Xiao just barely kept himself from flinching. "Since when are you the kind of yaksha that is willing to talk, anyway?"

"I've been trying really hard."

"Sure, whatever."

Breathe. Don't freak out. Bo is not your enemy and he's not going to hurt you.

"It helps. To talk."

Bosacius snorted. "Xiao, you eat dreams. *That's* what helps you. Not talking."

Xiao crushed a handful of grass. “You knew?”

“Of course I knew!” Bosacius’s purple eyes flashed. “You sneak away, and when you come back you look dazed and absent, and then you’re so unaffected by your mask afterwards despite having the most disgusting karmic slate, and what else could possibly do that for you?” He folded his arms, slouching down a little bit. “Do you even eat?”

Xiao shrugged. Bosacius hadn’t said anything that Xiao hadn’t already said before to himself. “We don’t need to eat.”

“That’s not the point. *You eat dreams.*”

Sparks flew. Xiao’s hair started to stand up from the static in the air, and his skin prickled slightly.

At least Bosacius was letting some emotions out. This was preferable to him holding on to all that he was feeling.

“I don’t eat humans.”

“Tch.” Bosacius made a little frustrated sound, clicking his tongue against his teeth. “Dream trawling is supposed to be a meditative experience! It’s not supposed to be this... This... *abomination* that you’ve turned it into. Do you realize that dreams don’t heal your karma? They just distract you from it. Every time you make another kill, you’re just adding to your karmic debt. It’s a spiral that just continues to go down, and you’re clearly addicted.”

I know, I know, I know. Xiao would not look up. *I KNOW.*

“How long did you plan for this to go on?” Bosacius folded his arms.

???

Now it was Xiao’s turn to glare at Bosacius, who actually did seem to falter under his gaze.

“Plan?” His voice was ice cold.

“What?”

“You think I *planned* to be like this?” Xiao did not even blink, allowing his own emotions to push the words from his mouth as Bosacius shifted uncomfortably. “I didn’t learn to dream trawl on my own. Did you think of that? Could you imagine who possibly taught me how to do so?”

Bosacius’s eyes went wide, and his arms fell to his sides. He looked like he was deflating.

But Xiao wasn’t done.

“Bo, you might think you know everything because you’re observant or because you care about me, but you don’t consider me. Could you think about the fact that I was a *slave*, and maybe I was forced to do this to *survive*?”

He could feel his eyes burning, pouring molten gold onto Bosacius’s shoulders.

The Electro yaksha’s four hands twitched on the grass. “*You didn’t tell me,*” he said quietly. Defensive. Accusing.

Xiao’s eye spasmed. “Bo,” he said slowly, “I love you, but if you respond to my weaknesses by yelling at me and making accusations, then I won’t feel inclined to tell you anything anyway.”

Bosacius immediately straightened up again, seating himself more firmly upon the grass, and all forms of electric emotion sapped out of the air. The loss of static was almost measurable. “Fine,” he said, eyes forward and face fallen.

Xiao went back to picking at the grass.

The tension was so thick and so unfamiliar that he hardly noticed when the majesty of Rex Lapis appeared behind them.

“Excuse me.”

Xiao and Bosacius jumped to their feet, but Rex Lapis waved his hand dismissively.

The archon’s eyebrows were drawn tightly together in concern, and Xiao could suddenly sense Rex Lapis’s restlessness. “Did something happen, my Lord?”

“I don’t mean to interrupt you,” he started, thoughtful and kind even in his uneasiness. “But. Have either one of you seen Ganyu in the last few hours?”

Xiao’s vision went red.

Ganyu is missing. Ganyu. Is. Missing. GANYU IS MISSING —

“No! I haven’t, what happened, please, what happened?” Xiao stumbled over his own words, feeling the panic rising in the center of his skull as his blood pressure rocketed.

“She had lunch with the Tianquan somewhere by the outskirts of the city, and then the Qixing lost track of her. The Tianquan is about to submit a missing persons report, but...” Rex Lapis spread his hands before him. “Those of us who know her know that she is almost never late for anything, ever, but it’s been two hours.”

T W O H O U R S

Xiao’s mind kicked and he could feel the synapses in his brain firing off but he *could not form a cohesive thought or string any real-sounding words together*. For all he knew, he was babbling.

“Xiao.” Rex Lapis said his name sharply. “I know where your mind is going, but she was never in a particularly dangerous or secluded place, and there are no more threats to anyone’s safety in the way that Kimaris was. Please think rationally.”

“What if she’s hurt? What if she’s unconscious? *What if she’s been kidnapped by someone else?*” Xiao subconsciously summoned his spear. Bosacius flinched away from him, but he didn’t care. “What if she’s been drugged, and she can’t pray or call for help from you, or from me?” *Ganyu is missing, and Rex Lapis wants me to think rationally??* “Please, where was she last seen?”

Rex Lapis narrowed his eyes. “Just outside northern Liyue Harbor.”

Xiao pictured the stone outcroppings of Liyue Harbor’s city boundaries in his mind. “Excuse me, my Lord. Bo.”

Without a second glance at his brother or his archon, he disappeared with a flash of light.

◇ ◇ ◇

According to the position of the sun, it was about three hours past noon.

Xiao had searched further away than anyone else had yet. Most of the Millelith had only been looking through the city, certain that Ganyu had just gone back to work somewhere, but something about that just did not sit right with him.

Ganyu had said that she took a nap every day at noon.

Sleep was dangerous. Sleep made you vulnerable and weak. Sleep caused kidnapping.

Archons. Why did humans have to sleep? Why did Ganyu have to be half human?

Why did Ganyu have to be weak?

Xiao turned slowly in place, eyes sharp and fiercely scanning every inch of the space around him. The sun was lost in the clouds behind the mountains, trees and shrubs and sweet flowers growing around the bases, grass growing in patches along the path that was only starting to be tamped down by foot traffic, no sign of any blue-haired horned half-qilin secretary anywhere, nothing, nothing, nothing *nothing nothing nothing NOTHING*

Why didn't the Qixing pray for help sooner? Why didn't Rex Lapis come to Xiao right away? He could have helped, he could have been on the scene instantly, he could teleport—

Maybe if you could teleport better, they would have sent for you right away.

Xiao shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut tightly. "Stop," he said out loud.

Think. Rationally. If she was in trouble, she would have prayed!

If she was asleep, she wouldn't have been able to pray.

"STOP." Xiao hunched over on the dirt path, pressing his hands into his temples as if he could stop his thoughts.

Pervases would have done a better job than you. You can't possibly do anything. Why did you think you could find her? The only thing you're good for is killing. The only thing you've ever been good for is being a disgusting, dream-addicted murderer.

And now Ganyu is missing.

Fear spread rapidly from the root of Xiao's spine all the way to the top of his head.

Flashes of red armor. The sound of beads clicking against each other and rattling iron chains. A black ceramic mask in a long-fingered hand capped by an iron nail guard, another cold hand pushing his hair away from his face...

A brash, sickening promise that twisted Xiao's stomach and set off multiple alarms in his mind: "*I will take good care of you.*"

Xiao's eyes flew open and he inhaled sharply, summoning his spear and wrapping his fingers tightly around the handle.

I will never, ever, ever, ever let anyone treat Ganyu that way.

And then he saw them.

Lightly imprinted wagon wheel tracks, and a few stray bits of hay.

He turned his spear in his hand and sprinted in the direction of the tracks.

Ganyu liked soft surfaces. Ganyu liked to sleep on grass. There was definitely not enough grass in this area, or even in the city, for her to rest comfortably. If she was so precise as to fall asleep at the same time every single day, she wouldn't have had time to find anywhere softer or more suitable; she would have gone for the closest soft spot.

Archons above and below. Xiao cursed silently in the back of his mind as he ran. The wind of his own speed stung his face, and his streamers seemed to hold him back.

He was grateful for Rex Lapis, eternally so. He owed the archon more than he could ever express. If he were ever to be called to give up his life for Rex Lapis, he would do so completely on instinct.

But the thought intruded his mind as he ran that *there was no one left for him to pray to.*

What archon was stronger than Rex Lapis? What archon had the power to know who or what was where and when in Liyue? Who could possibly give Xiao more strength or speed or resilience than he already had?

All he had was his own power.

So he ran.

◇ ◇ ◇

Xiao ran almost two kilometers, all the way from the outskirts of Liyue Harbor to Dihua Marsh, a path not unlike the one he had walked with Ganyu not even two weeks ago.

It felt like an eternity in the past at this point.

It was another eternity until he finally, finally, *blessedly* saw a pine wagon in the distance, just across from the tree where Ganyu had made her favorite place, stacked to the brim with hay and shielding the Cryo energy of the very asleep Qixing secretary.

He had to make sure.

"Ganyu!" Xiao shouted, running up behind the wagon, vaulting up over the closure and plunging his hands into the hay, throwing the downy stuff in every direction, ignoring the extremely distant sounds of a protesting farmer somewhere behind him. Within moments, chaff filled the air, fluffing up Xiao's eyelashes and flying into his sleeves. He impatiently blew it away with a burst of Anemo power, forcing his feet and arms deeper into the haystack. "*Ganyu!*"

"*Ouch.*"

He froze. "Ganyu?"

Very, very slowly, too slow for Xiao's panicked heart, Ganyu sat up and rubbed her eyes, yawning. Bits of hay fell from her bare shoulders and stuck to her hair. "I think I bumped my head." She murmured under her breath, opening one eye sleepily. "Xiao?"

She's okay.

Relief flooded Xiao's body, and all the adrenaline that had kept him on his feet for the entire day dissipated softly into a tingling sensation in his limbs. Xiao fell to his knees in the soft hay,

dropping his head forward onto Ganyu's shoulder, bringing his arms up behind her back and holding her close.

Ganyu's gloved hands, warm from sleep and sun-baked grass, fell cautiously on the sides of Xiao's shoulders. When he didn't resist or flinch away, she circled her arms a little further around him. "Xiao?" She said again, an undercurrent of concern in her voice. "Xiao, what happened?"

Heat was building behind his eyes, but he already knew he wasn't going to be able to cry. His voice was low and steady when he spoke. "You disappeared," he said against Ganyu's hair. "I thought... I thought something terrible happened to you. I thought I lost you." *Like I lose everyone else.*

"What?" Ganyu tilted her head, looking for the sun. Xiao felt the tremor of shock in her spine when she gasped. "Oh, Rex Lapis, forgive me! What time is it? Where am I?"

"Dihua Marsh." Xiao shut his eyes, hugging Ganyu a little closer. "Did you fall asleep in the haystack wagon?"

She sighed. "How did you know?"

"I know you." Xiao drew back, holding Ganyu at arm's length. "Ganyu, you have to be careful! You can't just sleep anywhere and trust that you'll just be fine. Please. You don't know what could happen. Only take naps in places where it's safe, okay? You can't be so naive."

Ganyu blinked slowly. "Isn't everywhere in Liyue safe?"

Xiao bit his lip. *This is why I don't sleep.* "You don't understand the world in the way that it is, Ganyu. There are places that you could be taken where even Rex Lapis won't know where you are."

"I don't doubt Rex Lapis. Given enough time, he'll know everything," she said, shifting to move Xiao's hand off of her shoulder. "Do you really see everything as dangerous?"

There was a defensive, slightly cold tinge to her voice.

Xiao immediately backtracked. "It's not that I don't trust Rex Lapis. Believe me. I've seen his power firsthand." *I've stood in fear, thinking that I was next, knowing that there would be nothing that I could do to stop it because of his sheer might.* "But I've also seen him be vulnerable firsthand, Ganyu, and he couldn't find me for *centuries*." He gripped some of the hay in his fingers. "I *don't* think that everything is dangerous, but you can't just... You need to be aware of the dangerous possibilities!"

"I can defend myself, Xiao!" Ganyu stood, hay and chaff tumbling down from her hair and bodice, hands trembling slightly. Her voice was shrill. "I have a bow, and I have a Vision, and in case you forgot, I'm an adeptus, too! Thank you for looking for me, but I wasn't in any danger. *I can defend myself.*"

"*Not if you're asleep!*" Xiao hissed, resolute, still on his knees in the hay. His eyes flashed when he looked up at her. "Ganyu, it's so easy for you to just think that everything is safe, and you might be older than me, but *there is danger out there*, and sleeping is the most vulnerable state of being! That's why I don't sleep! That's why I *can't* sleep! That's how I... That's how..."

If you tell her this, is she going to think differently of you?

Is she going to look at you with pity and guilt and sorrow like everyone else did in the beginning?

Are you going to lose your friendship with her because of this?

Ganyu had taken a step back, and her eyes were wide. “That’s how what?”

Look at her. She’s already afraid of you.

She didn’t know who he’d been before, or the contrasting process of events that broke him until he became deathly afraid to sleep.

She didn’t even know he’d been kidnapped.

All she knew was that he had a debilitating amount of trauma and he was addicted to dreams, but she liked him anyway.

I can’t tell her.

“That’s how I became the yaksha I am today,” he answered finally.

Ganyu knit her eyebrows together. “You don’t have to tell me anything that happened to you in the past. But you have to know that even though I like the yaksha that you are today, you can’t impose your past and your feelings on me because *I don’t know!*” She twisted the cords of her Vision, stirring up the dust and hay in the air. “Beyond that, Xiao, I haven’t heard from you in days. I didn’t reach out to you or pray for you because I thought maybe you needed space, especially after I heard about...” She hesitated for just a moment. “Maybe I could have reached out, but I just didn’t know what to do and I didn’t want to bother you, and I was safe! I promise I was safe.”

She was right.

She was always right.

Rex Lapis hadn’t even completed his search when he asked Xiao if he knew where Ganyu was. Of course, the most rational path of logic would lead to the archon asking Ganyu’s closer friends if they’d seen her instead of just recklessly searching under every bush of silk flowers in Liyue.

She’d been asleep, in a wagon full of soft hay, driven by a farmer that had no idea that she was there, unhurt except for a bumped head from Xiao’s own attempt to find her in the hay.

“Okay,” he whispered, still on both knees in front of her. “Okay. I’m sorry, Ganyu. I’m really sorry.”

Ganyu dropped back down, wrapping her arms around Xiao’s shoulders and hugging him again. Her eyes were watering. He could feel some of her tears in the thin fabric of his shirt.

He couldn’t hug her back.

“Thank you for finding me,” she said softly in his ear. “I’m sorry, too. I’m sorry for making you worry.”

They stayed like that for another minute.

Then Ganyu sneezed, a very human reaction to the dust in the air, and it was the most adorable sound Xiao had ever heard.

He drew back. “That was the most adorable sound I’ve ever heard,” he marveled.

Ganyu turned red. She stood quickly to her feet, sending more dust into the air, and vaulted out of

the wagon. “You just haven’t heard your own laugh,” she retorted, offering him her hand to step down from the cart.

Xiao shook his head, ignoring the compliment but taking Ganyu’s hand to humor her. “You sound like a very small mouse, or something like that.”

“A *mouse*?” she gasped, faux-indignant.

“A nice mouse,” he offered, jumping down from the wagon cart. “A cute mouse.”

“Hm.” Ganyu grinned. “Sure, then.” She did not let go of his hand. “Will you teleport us back to Liyue Harbor?”

Xiao hesitated. “I don’t know... I have to prepare myself a little first.”

“Okay.” Ganyu swung their clasped hands back and forth. “Take your time.”

Inhale. Exhale. *Everything is okay. Ganyu is safe. You have nothing to worry about.* He pictured Liyue Harbor in his mind. It wasn’t too far; he should be able to teleport there, no problem.

“Hey,” Ganyu interrupted Xiao’s thoughts. “Did you follow the wagon wheel tracks all the way from home to here? How did you do it? It’s not as though this one was the only wagon that came out of Liyue today.” She pointed at the narrow parallel lines in the path.

“This wagon has a new wheel, so it has one that has a thinner track than the others. For whatever reason, the latest technology utilizes smaller wheels.” Xiao shrugged. “It seems counterintuitive, but I don’t use wagons anyway.”

A smile played at Ganyu’s lips, and she looked away from him.

Xiao raised one eyebrow. “What is it?”

She grinned, just a hint of mischief glinting in her eyes. “The smaller wheel. It reminds me of you.”

“*What?*”

“Just because all the yakshas are so tall and visually intimidating, but you’re both smaller and more effective and powerful, like the wheel!”

Xiao huffed a laugh through his nose. “Which wheel are you, then?”

Ganyu seriously considered the question. “The back left one across from the small one.”

“Why that one specifically?”

“Well.” She squeezed his hand once. “Because you and I have to work together in order to make the wagon work.”

He squeezed back. “What does the wagon represent?”

“I don’t know!” Ganyu shrugged, laughing. “I’m just having fun.”

Xiao smiled sideways. “Are you ready to go home?”

“Yes, yes.” She looked at him expectantly.

He closed his eyes. He thought of Liyue Harbor. Sights. Smells. Sounds.

Breathe in.

Ganyu is fine. Everything is fine.

Breathe out.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Where were you all day?!”

Xiao flinched, clenching his fists and pressing his nails deep into his palms.

“Bonanus, please.” Indarias frowned.

“Don’t ‘Bonanus, please’ me,” the oldest yaksha snapped back. “We needed you, Xiao! We did not even go looking for these demons. They intruded *our* space. What were you doing that was so much more important than doing your job? Or defending your home?”

Xiao bit his lip hard enough to split it. He kept his eyes on the ground. “Ganyu had gone missing, and Rex Lapis had asked me for help.”

Bonanus scowled. “Rex Lapis needed help searching for a person, and he asked *you* instead of Pervases?”

Xiao raised and lowered one shoulder, eyes still on the grass at his feet that was quickly being covered by shadows in the sunset.

Breathe.

Bonanus sighed. He spoke flatly, passive-aggressive and full of subtext. “Don’t do this again, Xiao. I am aware that you have been through a lot, but you are not the only one suffering right now. You cannot just leave us to defend the karst alone so you can go off, gallivanting Morax-knows-where with your little qilin girlfriend. We need you.”

Xiao’s jaw tightened.

“Do you have to present it that way?” Indarias glared at Bonanus. “Isn’t there a kinder way you can tell him that?”

“What?” Bonanus asked, golden-brown eyes wide with confusion. “I’m defending you, Indarias! Aren’t you exhausted? Weren’t you healing and fighting at the same time? Weren’t you on your feet for much longer than you had to be? Don’t you know that we have a whole night of demon slaying ahead of us, even after the horribly long day we’ve already had?”

He waved his arms when he spoke. Xiao recoiled.

“It’s a compliment!” Bonanus continued, voice too loud and just barely holding back what must have been an entire dam of emotion. “We need him! He is strong! We could have avoided all of us getting all kinds of hurt if he was here, and he deserves to know that!”

Xiao lifted his head at that, darting his eyes to look at Pervases, then Bosacius.

Both of them refused to meet his gaze, Pervases staring awkwardly at Indarias and Bosacius blankly looking at nothing.

They got hurt because of me.

They got hurt because I wasn't here.

They got hurt for no reason.

“I’m sorry,” he said, very quietly, almost so quietly he didn’t even know if he’d said it at all. “I won’t disappoint you again.”

Bonanus clicked his tongue against his teeth, a little annoyed sound that Xiao didn’t quite understand, but he didn’t speak again.

Things were different. Xiao knew.

But some things didn’t change.

Maybe Bonanus would never try to understand what Xiao went through.

Maybe Xiao wouldn’t have the courage to tell him anyway.

Maybe even if he did, nothing would change.

Xiao’s chest felt tight. He could sense Indarias’s eyes on him, and for a fleeting moment, he wished that she would step in for him. He wished he could cry, and let the tightness out at least a little bit.

He could really use a dream.

“The demons are coming,” Pervases reported quietly as the sun fell behind the horizon and night stretched out against the sky.

Everything was different.

It was nice to know that Xiao was at least consistent in his ability to hurt everything around him.

Xiao summoned his spear, clinging to its familiar shape and feeling the thrum of its energy under his fingers.

He placed his mask on his face, leaning into the usual surge of power that seized his muscles.

He teleported easily into the unchanging nightly routine of battle the way he always did.

It wasn’t different.

Chapter End Notes

Ganyu Goes Missing Source Material: https://genshin-impact.fandom.com/wiki/Ganyu/Story#Story_4

Fam this took so long it took so long omg >_> I hope you like it

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Sustenance and Cecilia

Chapter Summary

“Do you ever miss eating food?”

Yes.

No.

Lotus paste fried in a sugary flower-shaped crust. Crystal rice wrapper stuffed with the freshest shrimp. Hot Jueyan chilies and juicy ham on crunchy rice crackers.

He did miss food. He missed feeling warm and full. He missed the tingling sensation of happiness that he felt all the way in the depths of his heart when he ate something sweet.

But he'd been so long without it, so long eating only ice crystals and snow that his stomach felt like it was the size of a walnut. If he were to consume anything less mild than water and ice, he was sure that he would not be able to keep it down.

Even so, none of that meant he didn't *want* food.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Xiao had more free time than he knew what to do with now.

In the aftermath of the Archon War with the increased number of demonic forces and emotional breakdowns, he couldn't even consider how much time he had wasted before the war, before his contract, before the important people in his life started to go.

He felt guilty now, thinking about how he used to spend his days just sitting and watching the sun go by when there was so much work to be done, so many demons to eradicate, and both emotional and physical fires to put out. Now, when the sun came up, he would be filled with restless energy, anxiously waiting, even though all he could do during the daytime was prepare himself for the evening.

The most irritating thing about the process of destroying demons was the absolute *helplessness* that the days were always calm and the nights were always chaotic. If the demons could just ascend throughout the days in less intense waves, he would be able to handle it — but *no*, they just had to come in overwhelming hordes and mobs, all at once, all the time. Every night was the same, but every night was exhausting, even for Xiao. It was a blessing when the sun rose and the demons mostly withdrew, leaving the yakshas emotionally and physically on their last legs. Even under direct sunlight, blood-scented energy would curl off the yakshas's skin and darken their moods and vision. Days were best spent recharging, finding ways to push through.

So Xiao spent much of his daytime with Ganyu! There was literally no better way for him to feel spiritually fulfilled and prepared for the long night of battle to come. He really did enjoy her company; sometimes he didn't know what to say to her, but even in the quiet moments, Xiao felt

satisfied.

In just a few days, he learned more than he would ever need to know about the human Liyuen workday.

He didn't quite like it.

"I just don't understand why you have to start the day at 4:30. Not even the sun is awake at 4:30," he told her, not for the first time.

"It helps me to get a little jumpstart on my day!" Ganyu smiled, and Xiao had to admit she had a lot of energy for someone who did require sleep. He'd seen some of the humans who stayed up too late or woke up too early, and they never looked like they were in a mental place stable enough to do any work or learn anything. "I get to read the important documents before the Tianquan comes in, and the rest of the Qixing are better prepared for the rest of the day as a result. I just need to label everything, offer my suggestions, and help them make the best decisions for the sake of Liyue. It's important work, and I love doing it."

Xiao shook his head, unconvinced. "Humans need to sleep in order to function properly. There are just... So many things that living beings require. Even yakshas need sleep from time to time."

"I guess that's true," Ganyu shrugged. She unwrapped the lunchbox she usually carried with her. "But I *love* my work. And they give me an extended lunch break!"

Xiao hadn't fully believed Ganyu the first time she told him that she took a nap every single day at noon, but it was true. The half-qilin had an uncanny sense of time. They met each day at her favorite place under a tree at exactly 11:30. She would eat her food as quickly as possible and immediately fell asleep at exactly noon, trusting that Xiao would protect her from whatever might be in Dihua Marsh. Her precision for time was astonishing.

Ganyu closed her eyes and offered a quick blessing over her meal before opening the box and taking out a bread-based dish that Xiao had never seen before. Usually she would bring some kind of mint salad or Qingxin, but today the smell of onions and tomatoes filled his sinuses, stinging his eyes and punching through the pores on his face all the way to the center of his skull.

"I haven't seen a dish like that before," he commented, trying not to cough or wince. "That's not any Liyue cuisine I've seen before. Where did you get it?"

"I made it myself, actually!" Ganyu said eagerly. "It's just crushed tomato and sliced onions on milk bread, but it's a classic in Mondstadt. The Monstadtians call it 'Fisherman's Toast,' but it isn't restricted to fishermen. It's delicious, and very easy to make." She offered it to him. "Would you like to try a bite?"

"No, thank you." More of the smell seemed to attack Xiao's senses, and he turned away, stomach churning.

"Oh! Shoot, I'm sorry, I forgot." Ganyu scrambled a few feet away from him, her dress dragging on the grass. "You only eat... Right. Yes. Sorry." She bit and chewed quickly, almost like she was trying to make the sandwich disappear as fast as possible.

Xiao grimaced. Ganyu needed to eat food. She was Liyuen, so of course she'd want to eat foods with more intense flavors. She hadn't done anything wrong, but now because of him she felt the need to apologize and scarf down her meal like she'd never eat again, *why did he have to be like this, why why why* —

“I’m sorry if this is an inappropriate question, and you really don’t have to answer it, but I’ve been curious for a very long time,” Ganyu said casually. She wiped her hands neatly on her napkin before wrapping it back around the box and moving a little closer to Xiao. “What...” She cleared her throat awkwardly. “What do dreams taste like?”

Oh.

He sighed softly. “It’s okay, I don’t mind answering it. I just...” He thought for a minute.

Dreams. Nothing that he knew of would eat them out of necessity, or for the flavor. Dream-eaters would only ever do so for the healing sensation and good feelings; for the temporary relief of escaping reality and consequence for just a moment. The taste didn’t matter.

Even if dreams tasted like dirt or sewage, I would still kill to have them.

But that wasn’t the question Ganyu had asked. That wasn’t the question he had to answer.

“They’re sweet, but not like how sweet flowers are sweet,” he tried. “They’re sweet in the way that seawater is kind of sweet. It’s very subtle. The best part of the physical form isn’t the sweetness, though.” Xiao smiled slightly. “The texture is *heavenly*. It’s like silk. It’s like purified water. It’s like the softest part of a Qingxin petal, and then even softer and lighter than that, and then it just dissolves...”

His voice trailed off.

Ganyu chewed her last bite slowly, purple and gold eyes rounder than he’d ever seen them, expression fully unreadable.

I’ve said too much.

“Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Well.” Ganyu huffed a laugh through her nose. “I understand now why you wouldn’t want to eat other food. After hearing about that, I guess a mixed mint-and-Qingxin salad doesn’t sound appetizing at all.” She gently poked his leg when he didn’t react. “Do you ever miss eating food?”

Yes.

No.

Lotus paste fried in a sugary flower-shaped crust. Crystal rice wrapper stuffed with the freshest shrimp. Hot Jueyan chilies and juicy ham on crunchy rice crackers.

He did miss food. He missed feeling warm and full. He missed the tingling sensation of happiness that he felt all the way in the depths of his heart when he ate something sweet.

But he’d been so long without it, so long eating only ice crystals and snow that his stomach felt like it was the size of a walnut. If he were to consume anything less mild than water and ice, he was sure that he would not be able to keep it down.

Even so, none of that meant he didn’t *want* food.

“Xiao?” Ganyu poked his leg again.

Xiao blinked rapidly. “Oh. Sorry.” He still hadn’t answered her question. “Sometimes, I guess, I do miss it.” His voice sounded strangled, and he awkwardly cleared his throat. “Are you going to take

a nap now?”

Ganyu’s eyebrows knit together, and her lips pressed into a line. “I... *I should*, but Xiao, do you want to talk to me?”

Don’t bother her.

“No, it’s okay.” Xiao tried for a smile, but the concerned look stayed on Ganyu’s face. “You have so much work and so much to think about already, and you need time to eat and sleep. Don’t worry about me.”

Ganyu frowned, and Xiao bit his lip. She opened her mouth to speak —

And the overwhelming archonic presence of Rex Lapis appeared behind them.

“*Rex Lapis!*” Ganyu yelped, leaping to her feet and bobbing in a curtsy.

Xiao stood, silently thanking the archon for appearing when he did.

“Hello,” Rex Lapis said simply. “It’s good to see you, Ganyu.”

“Thank you!” Ganyu beamed, smiling so hard that Xiao felt his own face ache.

Is it good to see me? “What can we do for you, my Lord?” Xiao asked.

Rex Lapis smiled. “I was actually looking for you, Xiao. Do you have the time to spare for me right now? I didn’t mean to interrupt anything.”

“You’re not interrupting anything!” Ganyu cut in, waving and taking a couple of backward steps in the direction of the city. “I’m going to go back to work and rest up, but I will talk to you later, Xiao, and thank you, Rex Lapis, for honoring us with your presence!” She bobbed again, and Rex Lapis nodded at her.

Ganyu patted Xiao’s shoulder once and smiled before heading off towards Liyue Harbor.

The spot on his shoulder tingled where she’d touched him. His hand flew up to settle the sensation, passing his fingers over the green marks on his skin.

Rex Lapis smiled knowingly. “She’s really lovely, isn’t she?”

“Yes,” Xiao agreed. “She is.”

◇ ◇ ◇

Rex Lapis had set up a cooking station on the west side of Mt. Aocang, where he had already set a few pots over fire. He lifted the lid of one of the pots, releasing a clean smell into the air, and stirred the boiling contents.

Xiao couldn’t help but breathe in the aroma, which didn’t seem too strong or too rich for his senses. “What are you making?” *Why are you making it when you don’t even need food?*

“I’m just boiling some boar bones right now. I will add more things later, but this soup is meant to cook for a very long time.” He took a sip of the soup, made a face, and put the lid back on. “At the very least, much longer than it’s already been cooking.” He glanced sideways at Xiao and smiled. “Food isn’t just for sustenance. Obviously for us, we don’t need nutrients to survive. But food can be a fellowship, and the act of making it can be therapeutic in a lot of ways.”

Xiao nodded. He didn't disagree, but the idea that the Archon of Liyue or any of his adepts needed to assemble food for themselves was kind of ridiculous.

"I wanted to apologize to you, Xiao," Rex Lapis said, and Xiao blinked in surprise. The archon sat on the grass under the shade of a ginkgo tree and motioned for Xiao to sit next to him. "I feel like I haven't given you the time that I promised I would give you when you first returned."

Xiao lowered himself onto the grass. "I've been dealing with it."

Rex Lapis folded his hands in his lap. "Xiao."

The yaksha's gold eyes moved silently to meet the archon's amber ones, steady and sincere as ever.

"I am so, so sorry for all your losses," Rex Lapis said. "I'm sorry that I haven't been there to help you through it. You have already been through so much, and you deserve more than I gave you. I promise I am here for you now."

No, no, no! Xiao shook his head. *Nothing that I sacrifice or lose could make up for what he has done for me.* "Thank you, my Lord. Please don't apologize."

If Rex Lapis knew what he was thinking, he mercifully didn't show it. "How have you been dealing with it?"

Xiao leaned backwards on his hands, breathing deeply, making himself a little more comfortable, allowing himself to fall into the familiarity that was his time spent with Rex Lapis. "I actually made a small breakthrough with Indarias," he said, smiling slightly. "We defeated a Pyro Regisvine together, and then stayed up talking through the night about the people that we love, and then burned some Lotus Crisps in their honor."

"That sounds wonderful! I'm very happy for the two of you!" Rex Lapis praised. "How are things with the rest of your family?"

Ah. "Honestly..." He squashed down the anxious feeling prickling at his heart. "Jueyan Karst... It's not my home anymore, and I don't know how to feel about my brothers, and I don't know how they feel about me, and I don't even know if they still love me, and I just..." He hesitated. "I don't know. I don't know."

The confession tumbled out of him like he'd burst open a dam.

Rex Lapis's expression softened. "What do they do in the daytime while you are in the city?"

"Um." Xiao wished he knew. "I know they eat a lot of food, just for the comfort of it. Sometimes Pervases and Bosacius sleep, even though Bonanus and Indarias don't want them to. Otherwise, I'm... not really sure."

One of the pots started hissing with steam, and Rex Lapis got up to stir it.

Xiao exhaled with the hiss. Breathe in. Breathe out.

"Do you know what they like to eat?" Rex Lapis asked. He procured a hank of ham, placed it on a stone slab, and began slicing it into thin pieces with a spearhead. "If food is a way for them to rest and recover, what do they eat?"

"Everyone loves lotus crisps and Jueyan chili guoba," Xiao responded promptly. "But to be more specific... Bosacius loves crystal shrimp, Indarias and Bonanus like all kinds of soup, like that

jewelry soup that Cloud Retainer makes, and Pervases just eats a lot of fish.”

Rex Lapis’s face quirked in a smile. “What kind of fish?”

“All fish?” Xiao wondered aloud. “I think he and the other younger yakshas were just really good at fishing because they were so sensitive to living energy, so he ate a lot of fish. Meno...” He sighed. “Menogias probably would grill it for them on her hands, and then they’d just eat it straight.”

“I see.” Rex Lapis nodded and dropped the sliced ham into the pot, decreasing the heat of the fire by quelling it with a small pulse of Geo energy. “Those are all things I know how to make. I will make some for you to bring back to them. But what about you?”

Xiao’s stomach turned at the scent of the cooking ham, and he swallowed back the bile rising in his throat. “I don’t eat food.”

“Yes, well...” Rex Lapis replaced the lid on the pot before opening another. “I did a little bit of research in the last couple of months, just a project that Guizhong had started that I intended to finish.”

A cloud of steam puffed out of the second pot, and Xiao braced himself for another wave of nausea — only to inhale deeply at the gently sweet scent.

He couldn’t place it. It was unlike the smell of apples or sweet flowers or sunsettia fruit or berries or lotus paste or even zhenxinsan. It was light. It was slightly familiar and perfectly sweet.

Rex Lapis poured out the steaming mixture into a tray that he sank into the mist flower-chilled water of the lake, where it set beautifully into an enamel-white block. He rinsed his knife and cut the block into smaller pieces that he arranged neatly on a separate plate. “I don’t know your taste, Xiao, but I personally decided that this dessert is best with osmanthus syrup and goji berries.” He held out the dish, beautiful and glistening with syrup and cold and inviting, and offered Xiao a spoon. “Do you want to try it?”

Xiao gingerly accepted the dish on the tips of his fingers. The pieces of dessert wobbled as they moved, and Xiao couldn’t help but smile. “It looks like tofu.”

“It does look like tofu!” Rex Lapis laughed. He was up to his elbows in the lake, rinsing out the pot he’d just emptied. “It is not tofu, though. I promise. If anything, it’s *almond* tofu.”

“What else is in it?”

“Why don’t you try it first?” Rex Lapis’s amber eyes twinkled with something like excitement, like he was holding back a satisfied smirk.

Xiao poked the spoon into the surface of the almond tofu, which easily broke apart and revealed the glass-smooth texture of the interior. *Beautiful*, he thought.

He could sense Rex Lapis trying not to look at him, too courteous to stare at the yaksha but too excitedly curious to resist watching him in his peripherals.

Xiao took a bite.

The texture was *heavenly*.

Silk danced across his tongue, slipping smoothly down his throat, coating his taste buds with the

light flavor of happiness and excitement —

No no no.

NO!

Xiao immediately tensed and pushed the dish away from himself, almost toppling onto the grass in the process, eyes darting to Rex Lapis in desperate need for an explanation.

Rex Lapis immediately straightened and rushed out of the water to take the plate. “What happened? Is it too sweet? Are you going to throw up?”

“Isn’t this..? Are those not...?” Xiao’s pupils strained his eyes. “How does it taste just like..?! How?”

“I am sorry.” Rex Lapis said sincerely. “The goal was to create a dish that gives you a similar sensation to eating dreams, but without the negative karma. I probably shouldn’t have surprised you. I’m assuming the recipe is a little too close?”

“Oh...”

He didn’t want Rex Lapis to see him in a dream-altered state. He hadn’t wanted his archon to feel more of his ruined karma and pity him.

But these weren’t dreams. He had nothing to hide.

Xiao reached out for the plate again. *I want more of it. I want it. Give it to me.*

He inhaled the remaining pieces, osmanthus syrup coating his lips and the fragrance of almonds coloring his breath.

Rex Lapis smiled. “I’m glad,” he said softly. “I’m glad it’s good enough.”

“It’s perfect,” Xiao breathed. “Thank you.”

This was a solution. This was a start. This was the beginning to the end of Xiao’s dream addiction.

He kind of wanted to ask for more, and maybe some more after that, and maybe just soak himself in a lakeful of the stuff —

But Xiao’s anxiety on inconveniencing Rex Lapis vastly outweighed any more cravings he could have had for this almond tofu. “I will never doubt you again.”

“Of course!” Rex Lapis waved his hand to disappear the plate and dry himself before sitting back down beside Xiao. “I can’t think of a thing I wouldn’t do for you, Xiao.”

A wave of guilt washed over Xiao and he sighed, savoring the last of the flavor on his tongue. “My Lord...”

Rex Lapis turned to face him. “Yes.”

“I am really sorry for doubting you.” Xiao chewed the inside of his cheek. “Not just today. The other day, when Ganyu went missing. I’m sorry for doubting you, and I’m sorry for just disappearing without being excused, and for not notifying you right away when I found her. I’m sorry. Please forgive me.”

“You are forgiven!” Rex Lapis exclaimed. “I hadn’t taken it as an offense. Please, don’t worry. I understand what it is like to be afraid for the safety of a friend.”

“I’m still sorry for doubting you.”

The god sighed, and suddenly he seemed to age a thousand years. “Xiao, I might be the Geo Archon, but I’m not all-powerful, and I’m not all-knowing. I don’t think it would be a very good thing for you all, especially *you* as an adeptus, to think that I *am* all-powerful or all-knowing. You’re not wrong to doubt me. Sometimes I am all-too worthy of your doubt.”

Xiao fidgeted with his Vision in his fingers. “To be honest... I stopped praying to you for a while. Back when I was enslaved. I guess I should have known that you can’t possibly know all that there is to know.” He looked at the archon. “I didn’t know if you were listening, and really I wasn’t sure that you cared. Would it have helped you find me sooner, if I prayed and kept trying to reach you?”

“Hm.” Rex Lapis stared at the ground. “I really don’t know, Xiao. Kimaris was very strong in a lot of ways that I am not, and he was exceptionally good at enchantments and the like. I’m so sorry it took me so long to find you, but trust me when I say I can understand your feeling of helplessness when it comes to prayer.”

“What do you mean?” Xiao almost laughed in disbelief. “But you’re so powerful. You’re the ruler of Liyue! Even if you don’t know everything, like where people are when they go missing, you have the power to move mountains and defeat monsters like Chi and Osial. You’re the farthest possible thing from helpless.”

Rex Lapis smiled, but there was no humor behind it. “Who answers the prayers of an archon?”

Oh.

Xiao closed his mouth and lowered his head.

“I don’t remember the last time I bothered to pray, as if there was anyone listening,” Rex Lapis continued. “Regardless, all my strength goes towards protecting the people I care about, and I haven’t failed them yet.”

“I can’t imagine you failing us.”

“Well.” The archon shook his head. “Your fellow yakshas definitely saw me fail to find you for decades, and I couldn’t save everyone during the Archon War, or help out our neighboring nations as much as I wanted to. You’re not the only one carrying karma.”

Xiao wrinkled his forehead. “I can’t imagine that, either.”

“Mmmm...” Rex Lapis folded his arms and looked up at the mid-afternoon sun.

Xiao sat up a little straighter, certain that a story was to follow.

“There was a goddess who ruled a small part of Northern Liyue,” he began. “Her name was Havria, and she was the Goddess of Salt. She was absolutely the kindest person I’ve ever known, surpassing even Guizhong in sweetness and peacefulness. As a result, when the Archon War started all those centuries ago, she refused to partake in it. The other gods in Liyue started claiming more and more land, and Havria naturally conceded to them until she was relegated to this tiny patch she called Sal Terrae.” Rex Lapis closed his eyes, drawing in a deep breath and closing his eyes. “Not all of her people agreed with that. Some of them formed a coalition and crowned

themselves a human king that killed her. He thought he was making a statement. He thought that he could show Havria's supporters that kindness would not save them from the brutality of the Archon War. And instead of saving his people, he doomed most of them to the surge of her power that escaped when she died." Rex Lapis's voice grew deeper. "Hundreds of lives were lost that day. Hundreds of bodies turned into salt."

The ground quaked slightly below Xiao's hands. The still-boiling pot of boar bones in front of them sizzled and hissed as some condensation dripped down the side of the iron and into the fire.

"I had never felt guilt or fault or the weight of karma on my soul for any deaths before then," Rex Lapis said flatly. "Even when I watched stars fall until a chasm was created to the west, even when some people died mining the jade that came out of it, even when I had to seal away my dear friend Azhdaha — all these things, millennia ago, I knew for *certain* I was doing for the good of Liyue. But this loss? The loss of the Goddess of Salt and nearly all of her people? It was for nothing. It was meaningless."

"It wasn't your fault," Xiao said softly.

"Wasn't it?" Rex Lapis asked, smiling ruefully. There was no anger or bite behind the question, only pain. "If I could have done more for her, if I could have protected her from Hunao and Jiyuan taking all of her land, then her people wouldn't have risen up, and she wouldn't have died." He sighed, deeply, and Xiao felt the earth beneath them settle. "I know in my mind that it isn't right for me to think this way, but it takes some time for my heart to catch up. I know I did not kill her, and I know that she had no grievance against me. I took in what remained of her people, and many of them are still alive and well in Liyue Harbor." He looked at Xiao, and his gaze cut right to the yaksha's soul. "But what is victorious in the end? The contract between friends, or the laws of karma?"

Xiao looked away, picking at the grass near his feet.

Rex Lapis sighed again. "Forgive me for speaking as long as I did. I know that you know the effects of karma better than anyone." He got up to check on the pot that he'd disturbed.

No one was free from karma; not even Rex Lapis. No one was perfect or all-powerful.

There was some freedom in knowing that Xiao could never live up to the standard of clean karma, but it was also just terribly, awfully, discouragingly confining.

He held his knees close to his chest. *Breathe. In. Out.*

"Ganyu told me something interesting," he said when Rex Lapis returned. "She told me that the humans have found a way to combat the living effects of karma for themselves."

Though you and I both know that the living effects are nothing compared to the actual consequences.

"Oh?" Rex Lapis settled himself on the grass, crossing his legs. "What happened?"

Xiao looked out towards the east. "The negative karma is in the air all the time, apparently. Even when my family and I destroy the demons that compact the karma, it can turn into pestilence in the air, and people will get sick from it. So some doctors in northeastern Liyue have found a way to stop the spread of it by burning the bodies of those that die from it. She read me the report, but I don't think that burning our bodies will help us as immortal beings..." His voice trailed off. "My Lord, are you alright?"

Rex Lapis's eyes had gone wide with surprise. "That is *fascinating*. I wonder where the karma goes. There's no way it's destroyed by fire. I suppose it just breaks into increasingly smaller particles. Who are these doctors?"

"Um." Xiao blinked. "Ganyu said they're focused less on treating it now and more on preventing the pestilence, so they started something called the Wangsheng Funeral Parlor as a more organized way to fix the problem."

"That is *fascinating*! The humans are so smart, ever-evolving the way that they do." Rex Lapis smiled. His face was full of wonder, and Xiao knew that his mind was racing. "It would do us good to learn more from the people and humans around us, wouldn't it, Xiao?"

"Of course, my Lord."

"Speaking of, I'm expecting a visit from another Archon fairly soon," Rex Lapis said casually. "You are welcome to stay and meet him."

"You — *what*?" Xiao's blood pressure shot up, and he jumped to his feet. "Who is it? Jing? An-ning?"

"What?" Rex Lapis raised his eyebrows. "Jing and An-ning? They retired together to a village in northern Liyue. Jing is attempting to live simply among humans for a while, and I can't imagine the god of Tranquility has anything to protest about that." He looked out over the horizon, squirting in the direction of Mondstadt. "No. I am expecting Barbatos."

"Jing and An-ning? They know each other?" Xiao's voice pitched, louder than he'd meant for it to come out. "They're *together*? What —" He stumbled over his own words as what Rex Lapis had said sank in. "*Barbatos*?"

"You called?"

Xiao jumped again backwards as the oddly faint Anemo presence of The Archon of Mondstadt descended upon the mountain in a gust of wind. He folded his magnificent set of wings, and the dust around him settled with a short blast of air.

He was only a few centimeters taller than Xiao, with medium-length hair arranged in two braids and cyan eyes that glowed with power that wasn't greater than the average god. When he smiled, the expression reached all the way up to the kindly tilt of his eyebrows, and he had childlike dimples in his cheeks.

It wasn't so much the unassuming appearance of the Anemo Archon himself that shocked Xiao than it was the gigantic bottle of wine that he summoned and threw full-force at Rex Lapis, who caught it easily.

"Here's some wine from Mondstadt! Care for a taste, Morax?" Barbatos grinned.

"Barbatos." Rex Lapis stood slowly. "Welcome. Did you... Leave your duties in Mondstadt... To bring me a bottle of wine..?"

The Anemo Archon tossed his blue-tipped braids, grinning in a way that Xiao could only describe as "cheekily." "Ehe. It's no problem, Morax! You're welcome."

Rex Lapis narrowed his eyes, but he procured two glasses and started to pour the wine.

The Anemo Archon! Was here in Liyue! On Mount Aocang, standing on Xiao's rock and throwing

wine at Rex Lapis!

He felt like he'd just fallen from the top of the mountain into the bottom of Jueyan Karst. He forgot to breathe in for a minute.

There was an unfamiliar white flower over the archon's ear.

Xiao had to ask.

"Excuse me," he said softly. "Carmen Dei."

Barbatos blinked at Xiao's formality. "Hello! Who are you? You're an interesting character." He took a step closer. "You're not a god, but *goodness*, are you strong?"

Ah. Xiao's eye twitched. "Thank you."

Barbatos grinned. "What's your story? I'm a young archon, and I'm allergic to cats."

Xiao's other eye twitched. "Archons can be allergic to cats?"

"Of course!" Barbatos laughed, as if it was the most natural thing ever. "Did you have a question for me, o powerful non-god? What's your name?"

"Oh... Xiao. My name is Xiao." He swallowed. *Just ask. Just ask the question, don't overthink it. He's friendly! He won't laugh at you.* "Is that... Is that a Cecilia flower in your hair?"

"Yes, it's my favorite." Barbatos plucked the beautiful flower from behind his ear. "Do you want to see it?"

Xiao took the blossom gently from the archon's hand, removing his own gauntlet to feel the petals a little better. The white petals weren't quite as soft as Qingxin, but they were longer and beautifully tapered.

He loved white flowers.

It must have shown on his face, because Barbatos smiled. "You can keep that one. There are plenty where I came from."

"Thank you, sir," Xiao breathed. This is a Cecilia flower. This is a Cecilia flower from the Anemo Archon himself. *The Anemo Archon gave me a Cecilia flower.*

Barbatos nodded, turning to accept a glass of wine from Rex Lapis. "Only half a glass, Morax?" He pouted.

Rex Lapis shook his head. "If you are here to talk about something important, I would like for you to be fully present."

"I'll give you an apple if you pour me more."

"No."

"Awh." Barbatos turned his gaze to Xiao again. "Would you like an apple? Or a song?" He summoned a lyre from the air, running his fingers across the strings to play a chord.

Xiao smiled faintly. "No, thank you."

“You’re a fun bunch.” Barbatos took a sip of the wine, dismissing the lyre. “Do you play any instruments? I’ve heard that Morax plays all of them.”

“He does?” Xiao turned sharply to look at Rex Lapis.

Rex Lapis looked away innocently, taking a sip of his own glass. “I’ve lived a long time.”

Xiao smiled deeper. “That’s amazing. I do not play any instruments.”

“You should learn one!” Barbatos exclaimed. “How about the lyre?”

“Mm...” Xiao hesitated. The sounds of the lyre were a little twangy for Xiao, resonating oddly against his eardrums, but he wasn’t about to tell that to *The Anemo Archon*.

This is happening so fast. He felt overwhelmed all at once, feeling two of the most powerful forces in Teyvat standing in front of him, *giving him flowers and drinking wine like it was nothing*. Xiao’s head spun, and he put a hand up to his temple.

Rex Lapis glanced at him. “Maybe you’d like the Liyue native sounds better than the lyre, Xiao.”

“Ooh!” Barbatos clapped his hands. “I’ve always wanted to play the Dihua flute.”

“Oh?” Rex Lapis summoned the reed instrument from the air and amicably passed it over to Barbatos. “You may have this one, since you brought me the wine.”

“Ooooh.” The Anemo Archon blew gently into the reed, testing a few notes.

Xiao exhaled the breath he’d been holding and smiled at the pleasant sounds; they reminded him of Indarias’s voice, sweet and light and beautiful and just slightly haunting, trilling in a lingering vibrato that melted into his brain, relaxing the tense nerves in his jaw. *Amazing*.

“Now.” Rex Lapis swirled his glass. “Xiao, I am sorry to cut our conversation short, but Barbatos and I have some things to discuss. Could we pick back up on this later? Maybe when the bamboo-shoot soup is finished cooking?”

“Yes, my Lord.” Xiao nodded and pulled himself back to reality, still holding the Cecilia in his hands, head spinning a little bit from the sheer pace of it all. He bowed towards Barbatos. “It was an honor to meet you, Lord Barbatos.”

“You as well!” Barbatos grinned and winked, his perfect white teeth shining. “I’m sure we will bump into each other again. Bye-bye!”

Xiao opened his glider and dove off the side of the mountain towards Liyue Harbor, intent on showing Ganyu the Mondstadtian flower he’d acquired. His heart was pounding with what felt like joy for the first time in months.

There hadn’t been a good day in a very long time.

Today was a good day.

◇ ◇ ◇

“I can’t believe you met the Anemo Archon, and he gave you a Cecilia!” Ganyu exclaimed. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m telling you now!” Xiao protested. “I only met him fifteen minutes ago. I’m sorry we didn’t

get to spend as much time together as we usually do.”

Ganyu waved her hand non-committedly, eyes still on the Cecilia flower in Xiao’s hand. “Don’t worry about it, Xiao! Don’t worry. If Rex Lapis asks for you, it’s no problem! You do whatever you need to do with Rex Lapis. And the Anemo Archon. Barbatos! That’s definitely a good reason to call me out of work after lunch break.” She gestured all around her at the Pavilion where the Qixing resided. Her eyes flickered back to Xiao’s face. “What is he like? Is he as powerful as Rex Lapis is?”

“Ehhhh...” Xiao squinted slightly. “No. He’s stronger than the other gods I’ve met—” *and killed* — “but he definitely could not even stand on the same stage as Rex Lapis.”

“Hm.” Ganyu tapped her chin. “I read some reports about the people of Mondstadt establishing a church and a giant statue for the Anemo Archon. Do you think Rex Lapis would appreciate one or the other?”

Xiao held back a smile. “He doesn’t seem like that kind of archon, and honestly, Barbatos doesn’t seem like that kind either. He kind of just does whatever he wants to do.”

Ganyu grinned and shrugged. “Isn’t that what you can expect from the Archon of Freedom?”

“I guess so.” Xiao leaned his back against a nearby pillar, twirling the Cecilia thoughtfully.

“Thanks for coming to tell me.” Ganyu took a step closer to Xiao, reaching out to brush her fingertips against the back of his hand. “I’m really glad I get to talk to you, even when you’re busy.”

Xiao flexed his fingers, turning his hand towards hers, letting her fingers trail lightly across his palm, closing his eyes and sinking into the sensation. “Me too. Sorry for calling you out of work.”

“*Ganyu!*”

Xiao and Ganyu both jumped as the doors to Yuehai Pavilion burst open behind them and a frantic-looking secretary skidded to a stop just before she could fall down the stairs.

“Meihua, what happened?” Ganyu let her hand slip away from Xiao’s.

“Ganyu! Oh, thank Rex Lapis! The Yuheng needed to sign the papers for the approval of the buildings on the west side of the city, and we were supposed to have those forms filled out *hours* ago! Please, where have you been? Have you just been here with the—”

The secretary abruptly clamped her lips shut.

With the what? Xiao bit his lip. What was she going to say?

“Yes, yes.” Ganyu pressed her hands together apologetically. “I’m sorry, Meihua! Please let the Yuheng know I’ll be right back!”

Meihua nodded and turned to race back into the Pavilion, leaving the door swinging back and forth behind her.

“I have to go,” Ganyu groaned. “I’m really sorry, Xiao.”

“That’s okay.” *You got her in trouble.* “I probably have to get back to my family soon anyway, and I have to pick up some things from Rex Lapis first and try to rest a little before the sun sets.”

“Right.” Ganyu looked at her feet. “I’m sorry. I forget you have a whole night of battle ahead of you.”

Xiao sighed. His arms felt heavier already. “Maybe I’ll see you tomorrow?”

“Mmm...” Ganyu pressed her eyes shut. “I might have to see. I think there might be a lunch event with the Tianheng and the Tianshu for the next week or so. Maybe before sunset after work hours?”

“I don’t know.” Xiao couldn’t even see the sun setting behind the tall buildings of the city. “I guess I’ll see you when I see you.” *I hate that.*

Ganyu nodded, mouthing a quick *goodbye* before running off into the Pavilion. The doors shut after her.

He didn’t really belong in the city anyway. There was too little sky, too little water, and too many people. By the time Xiao returned to Mount Aocang, he only had just enough time to greet Rex Lapis briefly and pick up some extra almond tofu and neatly packed food for his family before he had to return to Jueyan Karst to regroup with them. Maybe he’d had a good day, but even as Rex Lapis and Ganyu made him feel at home, Xiao had ended up being a distraction to them.

Maybe there was finally a concrete solution to fix his dream addiction, but so many of Xiao’s problems remained at the end of each day and night. There was no end to it. There was no end to his contract, no end to Ganyu’s, and no end to karma. Even when he filled up his mental capacity to fight through the night, another night would just come and deplete him again.

It was a cold twilight when Xiao teleported to Jueyan Karst, and he shivered when he felt the presence of his fellow yakshas waiting for him.

The Cecilia flower was wilting in the chilly air. One of its petals was missing, and the others had started to droop lifelessly.

Xiao sighed deeply. *Breathe in. Breathe out.*

There was a long night ahead.

Chapter End Notes

conversation-based chapters... they're actually so fun =_= not looking forward to all the fight scenes coming up

Re-read chapter 9 for refreshers on An-ning, Jiyuan, and Hunao
Zhongli’s first encounter with Venti (Story 5): <https://genshin-impact.fandom.com/wiki/Zhongli/Story>

More About Havria: <https://genshin-impact.fandom.com/wiki/Havria>

More About Wangsheng Funeral Parlor: https://genshin-impact.fandom.com/wiki/Wangsheng_Funeral_Parlor

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Parallel Lines

Chapter Summary

“I don’t really want to sleep anyway.”

Xiao managed a smile. “You don’t have to, but you’re going to be tired at work later if you don’t.”

“It’ll be worth it, if it means I get to talk to you.” Ganyu blinked up at him, purple eyes shining.

He moved to pour hot water into the teacups he’d prepared. “Let’s talk, then.” He held out Ganyu’s cup to her, and she sat back up to take it, tapping her fingers against the ceramic. He took a sip of his own cup, feeling the hot liquid warm him from the inside out and sighing softly as the calming effect of the zhenxinsan sank into his bones.

“What do you want to talk about?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Xiao hadn’t realized how much of a difference food actually made for him.

Almond tofu was a near-perfect substitute for dreams, and the feeling of having a comfortably full stomach was relaxing. It didn’t have the longer-lasting effects of dreams or the same elated feeling, but it was good for staving off the cravings that still came up every so often. It made him a little less on edge and a little less tired, and Rex Lapis was happy to make him just about as much as he could manage to eat. For the next month or so, Xiao managed to stay completely dream-clean.

In some ways, it was a little stressful.

Feeling like he could relax just made Xiao overcompensate. Even now, under the tree in Dihua with a plate of almond tofu in front of him and Ganyu’s comforting presence beside him, Xiao kept glancing over his shoulder. Everything was almost too relaxing.

“It’s amazing that you’re eating something now, but what you really need is sleep, Xiao,” Ganyu told him. “I know yakshas don’t technically need either of those things, but you’re not exactly the average yaksha.”

“No, I’m really fine. Really.” Xiao scooped another spoonful into his mouth. “Almond tofu is good enough for me.”

“Well.” Ganyu tilted her head. “It is definitely picking up in Liyue Harbor. The children love it.”

“Of course they love it. It’s perfect.” Almond tofu, even the non-divine stuff made by humans, was exquisite. Xiao allowed himself a small smile before setting aside his empty plate and turning to look at Ganyu.

The half-qilin was chewing the last of her rice bun and staring off into the distance. Her soft blue hair blew in the wind against her horns; she reached up absent-mindedly to brush the strands down

a little more neatly, squinting against the bright light of the noon sun.

She was just as exquisite as the almond tofu.

Ganyu peeked at him through her hair. “What are you looking at?”

“Something beautiful.” Xiao smiled.

“Hmmm.” Ganyu blushed, and her delicate lips turned into a pleased grin. She fell backwards onto the grass with a sigh.

Xiao’s gaze never left her face. “Is it time for sleep already?”

“Yes, but I don’t want to sleep.” She turned onto her side and rested her cheek on her hands. “I want to talk to you.”

“Well. If you sleep, I’ll make tea for you when you wake up.” He busied himself with preparing hot water in a metal thermos and taking some Qingxin and tea leaves from Ganyu’s lunch carrier as she smiled sleepily and closed her eyes.

It was amazing, really, how fast she was able to fall asleep.

The sun was filtering through the ginkgo leaves, making dappled patterns of sunlight all across the side of Ganyu’s body. Xiao’s Vision flashed shards of light as he kept his hands moving, measuring out tea leaves into two cups, adding some extra Qingxin to Ganyu’s and a dose of zhenxinsan for himself before settling himself back down.

Ganyu’s red horns brushed against the side of his folded legs, and she gave a little sigh of pleasure.

Xiao raised his eyebrows. He reached over silently and experimentally ran the tip of his finger down the curve of her horn, eliciting another contented sound.

“Do that more,” she murmured, face half-hidden behind her hands and the grass. “It feels really nice.”

Huh.

Xiao knit his eyebrows, feeling just slightly uneasy.

Physical touch still wasn’t really something Xiao had gotten acclimated to after regaining his freedom. At most he’d tolerated pats on the head or shoulder and a couple of forced embraces, and he’d allowed himself to lean on Indarias once. He had only ever hugged Ganyu once and kind of, sort of, sometimes held her hand.

This seemed different.

This, whatever this was, this caressing of her horns for her sleeping comfort, seemed just a little too intimate. It was too close, too comfortable, too *good* for Xiao. It was something Guizhong and Rex Lapis would do.

It didn’t seem like something for Xiao, at all.

Ganyu scrunched up her nose, eyes still shut but clearly not sleeping. A soft blue curl fell across her face.

Xiao wordlessly removed his gauntlet and moved the curl out of the way, pushing it behind her ear

as carefully as he could, not making any contact with her skin. He gently brushed her other horn with the back of his knuckle, and Ganyu smiled in satisfaction.

Suddenly his hand trembled, and a sting of dread seized his crawling nerves like a shock from the tips of his fingers to the top of his skull. Every time he'd touched her before, she'd been fully conscious and aware enough to reciprocate.

Touching her now felt like a violation.

He jerked his hand away, and Ganyu sighed at the loss.

"Can't you sleep without it?" He asked in a murmur, sliding his gauntlet back on.

"I could," she mumbled, opening her eyes slightly. "But I don't really want to sleep anyway."

Xiao managed a smile. "You don't have to, but you're going to be tired at work later if you don't."

"It'll be worth it, if it means I get to talk to you." Ganyu blinked up at him, purple eyes shining.

He moved to pour hot water into the teacups he'd prepared. "Let's talk, then." He held out Ganyu's cup to her, and she sat back up to take it, tapping her fingers against the ceramic. He took a sip of his own cup, feeling the hot liquid warm him from the inside out and sighing softly as the calming effect of the zhenxinsan sank into his bones. "What do you want to talk about?"

Ganyu was looking at him from the corner of her eye. "You're still sometimes afraid to touch me, aren't you?"

He choked. Tea burned in Xiao's throat, and dread filled his chest as he coughed and turned slightly away. "I'm sorry," he said softly. "It's not because I don't like you. I promise. It's just..." He cleared his throat, holding his cup tightly between his hands, looking straight forward with laser focus at a single blade of grass swaying gently in the sunlight. *Inhale. Hold your breath. Exhale.* The grass rippled. "I haven't had very good experiences with other people touching me."

Ganyu's eyebrows turned upwards in concern, and a little bit of curiosity.

Xiao didn't look at her.

He remembered all of it, he remembered everything, *freezing hands running through his hair, a sharp nail guard digging into the flesh under his chin, wine-stained fingers gripping his waist and forcing open his jaw—*

The cup in his hand shattered. Shards of porcelain landed on the grass and what remained of his tea seeped into the ground.

Sorry, I'm sorry, I'll replace it, he wanted to say, but his mouth had gone dry. His hands wouldn't move.

Ganyu deftly moved to put down her cup, gathering the shards into a small pile and placing them aside. "When I was little, I used to pester Cloud Retainer to pet my horns until I fell asleep," she said slowly. "Humans apparently need four hugs or so a day for survival, so the adepts that raised me made sure that I received a lot of hugs and kisses, and physical signs of affection, because they thought it was really important for my development." She laughed, a short huff through her nose and a soft smile that turned up one side of her lips. She glanced at him sideways again. "I really hope it worked."

Xiao exhaled, the breath just a bit shaky. He grabbed a handful of silk from his sleeve, crumpling the fabric in his fist. "It worked," he replied, just below his breath.

"How do you know?" Ganyu turned to face him, tucking her legs under her.

He pulled his knees into his chest, wrapping his arms around his legs and clenching his fist around his balled-up sleeve a little tighter. "Because we are very different."

"Hm." Ganyu was quiet for a second.

Xiao counted his heartbeats. *Breathe*. He turned his head slightly to face her, peeking through the dark strands of his hair. *Breathe out*.

She tilted her head. "I know you're a yaksha, and not half human, but did you never have any physical affection?"

He thought for a moment. Bosacius had always been a hugger, easily throwing one or four arms around his fellow yakshas or initiating friendly tackles. Menogias was a little more casual, leaning on Indarias's shoulders and giving Xiao head pats, and Indarias always found unique ways to assure him that he was loved and cared for.

But that was all a long, long time ago.

"I had some, I think. I had a good moment with Indarias a few months back, and I think I remember my family being fairly casual with touch a long time ago."

"But you hate it now?" Ganyu's voice was small.

"I don't hate it."

"But you can't really do it?"

Xiao chewed the inside of his cheek, shaking his head from the memories of red armor and iron gauntlets. His right hand found his Vision in the folds of his sleeve, but he lifted his eyes to meet Ganyu's. "We are very different," he said again.

Ganyu reached out as though she wanted to pat his hand before withdrawing again at the last second. "That's a necessary thing, isn't it? We're balanced. We need to be balanced." Her eyes shone, but her voice was steady and reassuring.

"Yes." He smiled slightly. "For sure."

His hands were shaking.

Ganyu turned over the cap of her metal bottle and brewed some more Qingxin petals and another dose of zhenxinsan in it, making sure that the sides of the makeshift cup weren't too hot before handing it to Xiao.

Xiao drank deeply, willing the herbs to calm him the way that dreams did but knowing that they couldn't. The cup was empty before he knew it, and he felt a little better, but his bones were still cold.

"Hey," Ganyu said gently. She swirled the dregs of her tea around. "Rex Lapis once taught me this cool trick with the tea leaves. Do you want to try?"

"Oh." Xiao swallowed and shook his head, trying to pull himself together before looking at the

sediment in the bottom of his own cup. “Is it tasseography? When you try to tell the future?”

“Yes!” Ganyu grinned, clearly pleased. “Has he told you your future before?”

Xiao squinted at his cup. “We just looked for shapes in each other’s tea leaves, and he told me what the shapes we saw meant. Is that how it works?”

She sat up a little straighter. “So based on how well the participants know each other, they should be able to see the clear future in the leaves instead of just hints and ideas. We know each other pretty well, right?” Ganyu beamed. “Do you want to try?”

“Okay,” Xiao laughed, feeling some of the tension leave his shoulders. He passed his makeshift cup to Ganyu, carefully exchanging it for hers. “What do you see?”

Ganyu held the cup with both hands and peered into the dark metal. When she looked up, she was smiling all the way up to her eyes, bright and earnest and beautiful.

Beautiful.

“I see you, totally free from all the things that scare you,” she began. “There are no demons, and you have no obligations, and even though your contract with Rex Lapis is essentially irrelevant, your friendship is stronger than ever, and you’re free to go adventuring! You’re traveling to Mondstadt, and Fontaine, and also Snezhnaya because you like snow. You discover all the best kinds of flowers, and all kinds of food that you like, and you’re happy. Nothing and no one controls you or inhibits you. No trauma, no shame, no addiction, no fear. You go anywhere you want, because you’re amazingly, wonderfully, *magnificently* free.”

She smiled impossibly deeper, and Xiao couldn’t help but smile back from the sheer fondness encompassing his heart.

She enthusiastically spread her arms out wide. “You’re the coolest and strongest adventurer, and you know all that Teyvat has to offer. That’s the future you *deserve*, Xiao. That’s the future I see for you.”

Xiao’s heart was fluttering, and was biting his lip hard to keep what was sure to be Teyvat’s Stupidest Grin from appearing on his face.

He could feel it already. This small taste of absolute freedom that Ganyu’s words had given him was exhilarating. To see everything he wanted, to not be held back by his own mind, to be not just physically powerful enough to protect himself no matter where he was, but also fearless...

I want it.

I want this future more than I’ve ever wanted anything before.

“Hey.” Ganyu waved her hand in front of Xiao’s face. “Xiao, are you with me?”

Xiao smiled, reaching out to still Ganyu’s hand, pressing the pads of their fingers together for just a moment. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“You deserve it,” she repeated.

He smiled again, willing his heartbeat to steady.

For the first time, his heart wasn’t pounding out of fear.

For the first time, he felt like he had a purpose for himself.

He let his hand fall back to the teacup in front of him, examining the contrast of tea sediment against wilted Qingxin petals, hiding his smile behind the dark teal hair that fell in a curtain between him and Ganyu.

She leaned forward and rested her chin on her hand, so close that he could feel her breath on his skin, but he focused on his thoughts and didn't flinch away. "What do you see?"

What are all the things you love about Ganyu? What kind of beautiful life does Ganyu deserve?

"I see you working and loving your life in Liyue Harbor," he said softly, just above a whisper. "Your work gives you so much joy, just as much as it does now, but you don't have to wake up at sunrise when you don't want to." His voice grew louder and a little more confident. "You still take naps every day at noon, and... You get to eat whatever food that you want without any negative side effects."

Ganyu half-laughed, half-scoffed, and Xiao grinned. She very gently poked his arm. "Be serious!"

"I'm serious!" He insisted, tilting the teacup toward her. "The tea leaves don't lie."

"Okay, okay." Ganyu rolled her purple eyes dramatically. "Go on."

He looked into the cup again, tucking the longer strand of his hair behind his ear. "You commission a project to make shrines for all the adepti that left us while serving Rex Lapis, and everyone appreciates you for it. You get to see physical proof that your work matters, and you achieve everything you want to do, and you're spiritually fulfilled, saving thousands of people, and ending all poverty and sickness in Liyue because no one loves Liyue more than you do. And at night, when you go home and rest and dream, you sleep well because you know that you're making everyone's lives richer and better in every possible way..."

His voice trailed off, and he looked up. Moisture was gathering in the corners of his eyes.

Ganyu was still smiling, but her eyes were just about brimming over with tears.

"Ganyu," he whispered.

"Xiao," she whispered back.

"This isn't going to work, is it?"

Ganyu's smile folded, and the tears started to flow down her face. "I think..." She exhaled slowly, and her breath stuttered. "I think Liyue needs both of us in really different ways, huh."

Xiao watched the tears drop onto the grass. "My family needs me," he said quietly. "They get hurt when I'm not there."

She wiped her tears away with the backs of her thumbs, but new tears quickly replaced them. "The Qixing need me," she echoed. "They get lost when I'm not there." She looked upwards, and her pupils focused on the shifting leaves above them. "And... Really, Xiao, I don't think that you trust me or anyone at all enough right now."

"I do trust you," he said, so softly that he wasn't sure if he intended at all for her to hear it.

She did. "I'm sure you do, but... But you don't trust me enough to take care of myself."

“You’re half human. You have physical needs, like sleep and food and touch.” Xiao closed his eyes. “... But I’m not perfect either. I have a lot of trauma to process.”

Ganyu sighed shakily, unable to stifle the sobs anymore, and Xiao reached out instinctively, wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling her closer to him. It felt wrong, like it wasn’t enough, but he had to do it.

Her whole body trembled as she leaned into him, wracked with consistent little breaths and sniffles and the steady flow of tears that cut streaks across her face. For minutes that felt like ages, there was no sound other than two hearts quietly breaking.

“Ganyu,” he turned to whisper in her ear. “I really care about you. I’ve never cared about anyone the way that I care about you.”

The sobs finally started to even out. Ganyu sniffled and wiped her eyes. “Do you remember those wheels on the hay wagon? That day I fell asleep and got transported all the way to the middle of Dihua Marsh?”

“Yes. One was smaller and stronger and left weird tracks.” He rested his cheekbone on the side of her head. “Why?”

“I feel like those wheels.”

He blinked. “I don’t understand.”

Ganyu swallowed. Her fingers picked at the cords on her Vision. “Liyue is the wagon, and we are the wheels. It needs both of us, but we need to be apart in order for it to function and move forward. You have a complete life purpose as an adeptus, and I have mine as a secretary. We’re only able to live our fullest lives apart from each other.” She blinked, scrunching up her nose. “I guess we’re the wheels, and our lives are the wheel tracks.”

“Parallel lines,” Xiao offered.

She smiled, and there was no humor behind it. “I suppose so. I guess parallel lines aren’t supposed to intersect.”

He pressed his forehead against her hair. “Ganyu.”

“Yes.”

“I’m really grateful that our lives intersected.”

Ganyu started shaking again and her breath hitched. Her hand flew to cover her face.

Xiao bit his lip. He must have said something wrong, he must have made it worse, *what was he supposed to say now...*

She mumbled something against her hand. The kumihimo cord in her other hand was starting to fray.

“Hm?”

She lifted her head, pulling away from him and turning to face him, frustratedly swiping at her dry eyes. “It’s. Not. *Fair*.”

Xiao felt the knot in his chest start to tighten. “No, it’s not.”

Even parallel lines can be side-by-side, he wanted to say. Even if they're an inch apart, they can still be beside each other.

But deep in his heart, Xiao knew. He knew that parallel lines had to be apart. He knew that he and Ganyu, a yaksha and a half-human half-qilin, could never fully be on the same level. He knew he had to let her go.

It didn't make this moment any easier.

"I really like you," Ganyu said, looking straight into Xiao's eyes. "More than I've ever liked anyone before."

Her eyes were red and puffy and dry, but the purple and gold colors were still sparkling and still more beautiful than any sunrise Xiao would ever see. "I really like you, too."

"Will you be okay?" She asked hesitantly.

I don't know. "I'll be okay."

The pressure in Xiao's chest increased as Ganyu stood and gathered her belongings. "I have to get back to work now." She turned back to Xiao, teeth worrying at her lower lip, eyes on the ground at her feet.

He stood, clenching his fists so tightly that he could feel his nails through his gloves. "Thank you," he murmured.

"For what?" Ganyu looked up at him, still holding back tears that just threatened to spill over.

For being my one light in the last months of darkness. For being the sweet spring rain in the everlasting winter that is my life. For seeing my desires before I even knew them myself, for loving me the way that you did...

"For everything."

She smiled, and it was like sunlight breaking a thunderstorm. "Do one last thing for me?"

I would do anything for you. "Yes."

"Take care of yourself, Xiao." Ganyu inclined her head respectfully, as if she was sending off one of the Qixing or a senior adeptus.

Xiao crushed the inside of his cheek with his teeth.

"I'll see you," she said softly, turning and beginning her walk down the hill towards the city.

With every step, Xiao felt his heart twist.

Please stay with me for just one more day.

Just one more minute.

Just one more second.

Stay with me.

"I'll see you."

Chapter End Notes

Songs to listen to after reading this chapter:

[First ~ mxmtoon](#)

[Heat waves ~ glass animals](#) (yea yea yea i know but you can't be an ao3 writer and not have at least heard about this)

[Good things fall apart/sad songs ~ illenium](#)

[Heikousen ~ Eve](#)

[See You Later~Jenna Riaine](#)

Our journeys will diverge here and we'll learn from what we know ♥

[Follow me on Twitter \(yes ya girl learned how to link\)](#)

Love Like Water Ever Flows, Part 1

Chapter Summary

Indarias's expression softened, even as Xiao could feel his emotional walls coming up.

"We both have our separate lives and our separate contracts. And we'll always be around. It's not like she's dead." *Stop talking. You're basically babbling.* "We'll be okay."

"You will," she agreed quietly.

For whatever reason, her calmness irritated Xiao more. Like she was humoring him instead of believing the things that he was saying.

He folded his arms across his chest. "I'm *fine*, okay?" He could hear the bite in his own voice, but he didn't care. "I'm fine. It's fine, Indarias. I'm doing just great." He dug his nails slightly into the flesh of his arm. "You don't have to *mother* me."

He regretted it the moment he said it.

Chapter Notes

tw: trauma/claustrophobia, blood/gore

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The following few days were some of the most frustrating Xiao had ever experienced.

Nothing was specifically wrong; it was just that the sun was too bright, the moon was too dim, the wind was too cold, and just nothing ever went right or was good enough ever.

Even now, the afternoon sun was irritatingly bright, the soft shearing sounds of Indarias cutting Pervases's hair were too loud, the fish that Pervases was trying to grill over an open fire was smelly and close to burning, Bosacius was snoring loudly in his sleep and it was annoying, and the grass under Xiao's legs where he sat was too pointy and poking his legs.

He sat with his eyes half-closed and tried not to care.

"Aiya," Bonanus tsked when the fish inevitably caught on fire. "I could have done that for you, Pervases."

"But I wanted to try it." Pervases made a face and put out the fire in front of him with a small wave of earth. The charred fish on the stick he was holding was almost unrecognizable. "Xiao, did Rex Lapis make us any more food after last time? It just doesn't taste the same when I try to do it."

Xiao didn't bother looking over. "No. Don't bother him."

Indarias frowned, and Xiao could feel her eyes on him. “Xiao, are you okay?”

He nodded curtly up and down once.

“Are you sure?”

Xiao’s eyes flew open, and he glared at Indarias. *I hate being asked if I’m sure.* “Yes, Indarias, I’m *fine*, so you don’t have to ask again.”

Indarias held his glare for a moment, steady, soft light blue unblinking against molten gold.

Xiao dropped his gaze first and fidgeted a bit under her gaze. It felt like she was looking right through him.

“Alright then.” She suddenly looked away and clipped the last bit of Pervases’s hair. “Per, you’re done. Xiao, come over here.”

“Oh. Thank you!” Pervases ran his hand through his hair and shifted down into the karst.

Xiao didn’t move.

Indarias folded her legs more resolutely on the grass, looking at Xiao with all the patience in the world.

Fine. Xiao stood and walked over to Indarias, seating himself in front of her, unable to hold back his frustrated sigh when the grass stabbed his legs through his pants once again.

The Hydro yaksha tilted her head. “Will you talk to me?”

“Nothing’s wrong, Indarias, I’m literally fine.” He brought his hands together and picked at the edges of his Vision. “It’s whatever.”

“Okay.” Indarias nodded. “It has been... Really very nice to see you spending more time with us, Xiao.”

Her words were carefully chosen and carefully delivered, and her intention beneath the sentiment was clear to Xiao.

She knows you have time because you aren’t seeing Ganyu anymore.

His eye twitched from irritation. “I know my daily life is going to change. I know I’m going to have all this free time now that I won’t know how to spend. But I know that what happened with Ganyu was the best for both of us, and I feel like that’s fine. It’s a good thing.”

Indarias’s expression softened, even as Xiao could feel his emotional walls coming up. “It is.”

“We both have our separate lives and our separate contracts. And we’ll always be around. It’s not like she’s dead.” *Stop talking. You’re basically babbling.* “We’ll be okay.”

“You will,” she agreed quietly.

For whatever reason, her calmness irritated Xiao more. Like she was humoring him instead of believing the things that he was saying.

He folded his arms across his chest. “I’m *fine*, okay?” He could hear the bite in his own voice, but he didn’t care. “I’m fine. It’s fine, Indarias. I’m doing just great.” He dug his nails slightly into the

flesh of his arm. “You don’t have to *mother* me.”

He regretted it the moment he said it.

Indarias looked stung. She dropped her head, and the long strands of hair on either side of her face fell forward, hiding her eyes from Xiao. “Alright,” she said quietly.

She’s trying to help. Why are you being so terrible to her?

Xiao looked away.

Then Pervases gasped, loud enough to wake Bosacius and capture the attention of all the other yakshas.

“What is it? What happened?” Bonanus asked immediately.

“Lawachurls!” Pervases jumped to his feet. “Lawachurls, possessed Stonehide Lawachurls, infiltrating Moon Carver’s abode.”

Bosacius groaned. “Moon Carver can handle it, can’t he?”

“He’s not there right now. We have to go!” Pervases tugged at Bosacius’s arm. “They’re going to collapse part of the karst if we don’t stop them. Come on!”

Xiao sighed. Lawachurls were always difficult to defeat due to their thick armor and their tendency to jump. *Possessed* lawachurls were even worse; they had no regard for their own safety, recklessly destroying everything around them to the point of their own demise, purely for the sake of wreaking havoc for the adepti.

Invisible karma pricked at Xiao’s wrists as he pulled himself to his feet.

He could sense Indarias behind him, but he didn’t look back at her.

Moon Carver’s abode wasn’t far from Jueyan Karst; he didn’t have his own domain gates, but everyone knew that he occupied the sacred space just east of the karst the same way that Cloud Retainer had a domain around Mount Aocang and Mountain Shaper lived in Mount Hulao.

The unfortunate thing about the placing of Moon Carver’s space was its precarious positioning between rocks. It wasn’t as if a landslide would be life-threatening to the yakshas who lived in the karst, but it was a kind of a violation to the sacred home of the adepti.

So subsequently, these three possessed lawachurls were the yakshas’s problem.

The Stonehide Lawachurls were hulkingly large, almost brushing up against the rock that hung over their heads, roaring as the yakshas appeared and slamming the ground.

Xiao was already wildly irritated with the events of the day, and the frustrating sound of his jade spear bouncing uselessly off the lawachurls’s armor was grating his nerves even more. Anemo power was the least helpful element against Geo armor. And Xiao wasn’t used to feeling helpless in combat.

He held his spear at the ready as Bonanus and Pervases used Geo attacks to chip away at the lawachurl armor; Bosacius and Indarias combined their elements to course electricity through the lawachurls, sending crystallized shards in every direction; and Xiao stood, waiting for the opportune moment to —

“Xiao, *now!*” Bosacius shouted just as the tallest lawachurl slammed its gigantic arm into the side of the cavern. Rubble started to fall from the ceiling, crashing into the ground and blasting dust into the air.

Finally.

Xiao summoned his mask, shaking his head impatiently to clear the voices before propelling himself up into the air.

You worthless useless inferior trash pathetic miserable wretch hate you hate you hate you

He gritted his teeth, turning in the air at the peak of his jump and plunging downwards into the midst of the lawachurls. Anemo spears shot up from the ground and pierced through the screaming lawachurls.

Their roars of pain and the booming sounds of their bodies hitting the dirt seemed to urge the voices in Xiao’s head louder.

You disrespectful shit, you worthless useless inferior trash, what are you good for we hate you hate you hate you HATE YOU

“I’m not useless,” Xiao muttered, his voice louder to his own ears from the shape of the ceramic mask. “*I’m not useless.*”

He propelled himself off the ground again.

He didn’t hear Pervases shout. “No, Xiao, *wait!*”

The lawachurls fell further back when he came down again.

Up.

Down.

Xiao moved easily through the noise of the voices and the pain of his body pulling apart. *Forget the voices. Forget the life essence burning off of your skin. Destroy. Destroy the demons.*

He finally stopped when he realized the cavern was collapsing.

“*Shit!*” Bonanus immediately threw his arms up, casting a glowing Geo shield and holding away the rocks and rubble caving in all around them. He tilted the shield with a grunt of exertion, aiming the slide and burying two of the three lawachurls under the rock.

Xiao’s mask disappeared and he gasped, heart pounding and bones clattering from the Geo quaking. He hadn’t realized exactly how winded he was.

Just breathe, he thought. You’re fine, just breathe.

And then he looked up and his vision flattened.

I can’t see the sky.

He couldn’t see the sky, he couldn’t see at all, it was too dim, he couldn’t get out of the cavern, he was stuck in the dark in the pressing walls that were closing in *no no no no NO*

Xiao sank into a crouch, eyes shut tight, head spinning, not even caring when the one remaining

lawachurl started to get back up. “Let me out,” he whispered, desperation crawling under his skin. “Please don’t leave me here, *please...*”

“*Xiao.*”

Healing Hydro energy flooded his body, and he breathed in shakily, half-opening his eyes.

“Xiao, you’re okay.” Indarias said, softly but firmly, close but not touching him. “We’re here, and we’re not going anywhere without you. I know it’s scary right now, but we’re okay. We’re *together.*”

He breathed out, and his heartbeat steadied. The cavern still swam in his vision, but he could focus on the glow that came from Indarias’s Hydro energy and Bonanus’s shield and Bosacius’s bolts of electricity as he fought the last lawachurl. *Okay. Inhale. Exhale.*

“Thank you,” he whispered, feeling some of the tension leave his shoulders.

Forget the ceiling. Trust in Bonanus. He summoned his spear back, turning to help Bosacius.

We’re together.

Indarias nodded once before casting her attention to Bonanus. “Pervases!” She yelled at the other Geo yaksha, who was staring off to the other side of the cavern. “Per, *help Bonanus!* What are you doing?”

“There’s a human in here!” Pervases shouted, abruptly swinging his sword to shift some of the rubble under the landslide. “I have to save it!”

“A human?!” Indarias’s energy shifted, boosting Bonanus’s stamina as he grunted under the weight of the cavern roof. “What about *us?*”

“Please!” Pervases turned to stare at Indarias, increasing desperation in his voice. “You have to let me try, Indarias! I’m not a fighter, I’m a seeker! This is what I’m supposed to do, please, let me save the human!”

Bosacius dodged and rolled, just narrowly missing the lawachurl’s fist. “I don’t sense a human, Pervases, but I do sense a fucking *lawachurl currently kicking my ass!*” He shouted.

“*It’s a very small human!*” Pervases shouted back. “It’s an innocent, small, *dying* human caught in *our crossfire!* It’s only seven years old!” He cast more rubble aside. “I have to do this, I’m sorry!”

“*Pervases!*” Bonanus roared, shifting more debris under the shield.

But Pervases had already disappeared into the landslide.

“Archons—” Indarias cursed.

Xiao didn’t dare summon his mask again. He didn’t think the cavern could handle it.

“Fuck this lawachurl,” Bosacius moaned, stepping back as Xiao dash attacked in front of him. “Why couldn’t they all have been buried?”

Xiao scoffed. “Because Teyvat hates us, and specifically us.”

Bosacius laughed without a trace of humor. “It does, doesn’t it?”

“Hey!” Indarias frowned. “Does anyone else feel that?”

“What?”

Her blue eyes went wide. “Bosacius, *get down!*”

The landslide suddenly erupted in a piercingly cold white blast of Cryo energy, freezing the wall of water that Indarias had only just managed to throw up in time. The ground rocked upwards under Bonanus’s feet, and the entire cavern seemed to shift sideways.

Xiao held his spear tightly in his hands, bracing it against the rock wall. All he could see through the dust was the soft glow of the shield. Dirt and sweat froze against his skin, but he didn’t dare move to scrape it off.

He only dared to even blink when the rumbling finally stopped.

“Yakshas! Are you alright?” Moon Carver’s face appeared in the newly-opened mouth of the cavern, peering in and looking about with as much concern as a stag could express. “Where did all this ice come from?”

No one answered him.

Xiao exhaled, a hot wisp of haze in freezing air.

Pervases’s life energy had disappeared.

For a long, long, long moment, the cavern was still with the scraping sounds of the beast adepts shifting rocks, and the ice-cold quiet of four yakshas falling apart.

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“Tiiiihhhhhhhhh...”

Xiao looked up.

Something was crying from behind the wall of ice.

Bonanus dropped his shield. Small landslides of smaller rocks bounced off his shoulders as he summoned his claymore and smashed the hilt into the ice wall.

The smallest human Xiao had ever seen shook in fear and pain, clutching a small bunch of violetgrass in her hand. Her eyes were distant and bloodshot, and her side and leg were bleeding heavily.

She was so small. She was so *helpless*. She didn’t deserve this. She shouldn’t have been caught in this crossfire. She shouldn’t have to live with the memory of this freezing, lonely, horrifying pain...

Then her life force faded slightly, and her strangely pink eyes fluttered shut.

“Indarias!” Bonanus shouted, shaking the cavern further. “Indarias, do something! Heal her!”

The Hydro yaksha shook out of her initial stupor. “I can’t... It’s happening too fast for me to make a difference.”

“*Try!*” Bonanus shouted again, kneeling over the tiny pale body.

Moon Carver, Mountain Shaper, and Cloud Retainer, having finally stabilized the cavern, stepped in cautiously. “What is this?” Cloud Retainer asked.

“Her consciousness hasn’t dispersed yet!” Bonanus rumbled. “If she dies, then Pervases died for nothing!”

Xiao looked down at the human’s now fully-white body in a pool of its own blood.

Her side had been torn by an Anemo spear.

You killed a human child.

You killed Pervases.

Xiao stumbled, putting his hand out to the rock wall to catch himself.

This is your fault.

“Help me!” Bonanus held his hand out, pouring some of his adeptal energy into the human’s body.

Xiao dropped to the ground, hugging his knees to his chest, holding his head in his hands as Bosacius, Indarias, and beast adepts stepped forward, each imparting some of their energy for the human. Their words were fuzzy in his ears.

“This is insanity.”

“It is not as if One has never reanimated a body before.”

“Yes, but it has never been a human body this young.”

“Nor has it ever been an *allogene*. Did no one notice that the human has a Vision?”

“What in Teyvat is an *allogene*?”

“An *allogene* is a Vision-carrying human, you ignorant yaksha.”

“That is where the Cryo energy came from.”

“Oh, *shit!* What the *fuck?*”

Xiao looked up as Bosacius jumped backwards.

The tiny human — no — the tiny *zombie* gasped abruptly, and a small blast of freezing air flooded the space of the cavern. The adepts shielded their faces as the zombie stood up and started sprinting in circles, sending shards of ice whirling through the air.

“*Mama!*” She screamed, magenta eyes spinning in her head. “Mom, I want my mom! I want to go home!” Her head snapped unnaturally to the side. “*Mama, baba, help me!*”

She cried hiccuping sobs that echoed against the walls, chest rising and falling rapidly with oxygen that she didn’t need anymore, but her eyes remained dry, like she couldn’t produce tears.

Indarias reached her hand out. Her eyebrows knit together in concern, and her eyes were shimmering. “She’s healing herself,” she said softly. “The zombie doesn’t need healing from me. I don’t know how to help her.”

Bonanus’s fists were clenched so tightly they were glowing. “There has to be something we can do.” He looked desperately at the beast adepti. “Please. What can we do?”

Mountain Shaper shook his head. “The jiangshi Reanimation cannot be allowed to return to her people.” His black crane eyes were beady. “One can seal the zombie in amber to contain the power for now. That is the best One can offer.”

“Hm-mm.” Moon Carver stomped one of his hooves, and Xiao flinched at the sound. “If the zombie is still conscious, and simply stuck in amber, it will be like a living hell. One cannot in good conscience allow this.”

“Mama!” The zombie screamed again. “Mama, I’m sorry! Please help me!”

Cryo energy frosted over the adepti’s skin and the walls of the cavern. The sounds of cracking ice were like shattering bones.

Xiao’s face burned.

“Xiao.”

He lifted his head. All of the gathered adepti were staring at him.

“Xiao,” Bonanus repeated, amber eyes grim. “Eat her dreams.”

His stomach plummeted.

“*What?*” Indarias screeched, and the cavern trembled again.

Cloud Retainer was glaring at him. “The Conqueror of Demons eats dreams?”

“*Listen to me!*” Bonanus shouted. “It makes perfect sense, alright? What else can we do for her?” His shoulders rose and fell rapidly with the intensity of his words. “She either dies for good, or she remembers everything and remains stuck in this undead state. Would we not be doing her a *favor* if we let Xiao do this?”

Moon Carver sighed. “One believes that killing her would lead right back to the initial problem.”

“Conqueror of Demons.” Mountain Shaper looked directly at Xiao, and Xiao looked away. “You should do this.”

Xiao dropped his head in his hands again, pressing his knuckles against his temples.

It was too much.

All of this was too much.

I can’t do it. He squeezed his eyes shut tight and shook his head rapidly, dark hair flying in all directions.

“No!” Indarias shrieked. “How can you possibly ask this of him? Xiao, no!”

“Xiao…” he heard Bosacius say cautiously.

I can't do it.

I can't do it.

I've been doing so well.

I can't.

His jaw clenched, and tension built from his teeth all the way to the top of his skull.

But I want to.

"It's been so long," he whispered to the ice under him. "It's been so long since I've had a human..."

It was getting colder by the second. Xiao shivered, but he wasn't sure if it was from cold or dread.

"Xiao, we are giving you permission to do this," Bosacius said firmly. "For Pervases."

The zombie was still crying, screaming for her family, screaming to go home, clutching a Liyuen Vision in her hand and blasting Cryo energy in every direction.

Put her out of her misery.

For a moment he wondered if he even remembered how to perform the Dream Trawler.

But not a fraction of a blink later he was holding the zombie in his arms, one finger on her numbingly-cold forehead, calling forth her dreams before Indarias could shout at him to stop.

Dreams seemed even sweeter after going so long without.

He felt life.

Joy.

Love.

Sweet, sweet, dreams.

Maybe the girl had been too close to death, or too young to have big aspirations or motivation to live, but suddenly Xiao could see a memory through the little girl's eyes.

She was swimming and splashing in shallow water, somewhere around Qingce village, feet kicking furiously behind her as she held her mother's hands.

"Yay!" Her mother, a woman with lovely dark hair, encouraged her and pulled her closer to a low waterfall. "Kick, kick, kick!"

The little girl's heart was pounding as they approached the falls. "Mama, don't let me go, okay?" she demanded. "Don't make me go under the waterfall!"

Her mother laughed. "The water isn't scary," she told her. "Look." She put her hand under the gentle falls. "It won't hurt you."

"I don't like it," the little girl insisted. "It never goes away, and it's too loud, and it's too much."

"Well, think of it this way." The little girl found herself swept up in her mother's arms, and the

flow of the waterfall down her arm was gentle and not at all scary. She breathed a little easier, still clinging to the hands that held her. "My love for you and daddy is like a waterfall. It never runs out, and it's loud! Do you think it's too much?"

She swept her small hands through the water. "Well, then, I'm gonna freeze it, so it never goes away. How wonderful would that be?"

Her mother burst out laughing again. "Love and water flow forever. Even if you don't freeze it, Little Finch, it will never go away."

The memory faded, and a burst of ambition flooded Xiao's mind.

She wanted to freeze time. She wanted to protect the people she loved. She wanted to harvest violetgrass and Qixing and be a herbalist when she grew up, just like her parents.

Sweetness.

Light.

Joy untainted by a dark past.

Xiao raised his hand to his eyes. Tears had frozen on his face.

These weren't his tears; they were the zombie's.

The small body was breathing steadily, unmoving in his arms.

"Thank you, Xiao," Bonanus said gruffly but softly as he lifted the zombie away from Xiao with the utmost care.

Xiao hardly noticed. His ears were ringing and his vision was hazy.

"One will tell Ganyu to notify the family of the accident tomorrow," someone said distantly.

"The Reanimation will be fine. It might have memory issues when it wakes, but it will be fine."

"Reanimations don't function the same way that humans do. When she wakes up, she'll be different."

"Just let her sleep. Her mind is inactive right now."

Someone slipped a warm hand into his and led him out of the cavern. The air was warmer in the setting sun.

"Her body is still radiating with our energy. It might be too much for the mountain to handle."

"One is certain that she is dreamlessly sleeping. One believes it is logical to seal her in amber now."

"Will an allogene remain sealed?"

"Yes."

Xiao inhaled shakily.

The hand in his squeezed gently, and he instinctively squeezed back. His vision was starting to

clear.

The chunk of amber before him was tall and wide, large enough to intimidate any stray human or hilichurl that might come across it. Mountain Shaper stood back and gave it a nod of approval. “The Reanimation will be safe.”

Xiao reached out with his free hand to touch the amber, which glowed softly at the contact. “It makes sense that she was given a Vision,” he murmured to no one in particular. “There’s no greater ambition than to protect for the sake of those you love.”

“Well said.”

Xiao turned to see Indarias holding his hand, looking at him with a small smile. She squeezed his fingers once more before letting go.

“Let’s go home.” Bonanus stood, fully composed, arms crossed over his chest and face completely stoic. “We need to rest before the sun sets.”

Right.

Tonight would be another night of demon slaying, as if Pervases hadn’t died, as if Xiao hadn’t relapsed harder than he ever had before, as if the other adepti hadn’t been emotionally affected by creating a reanimated corpse.

Cloud Retainer, ever the engineer, struck the opening of the cavern in a few strategic places, effectively controlling a landslide that collapsed the cave entirely. She nodded to Moon Carver once, and he nodded back, a silent understanding that he would find a new abode.

As if it all never happened.

Bosacius sat on the grass in front of the amber chunk. “Flowers and dreams spreading throughout,” he chanted. “Flowers. Dreams. Spreading throughout. *Reunited.*”

Xiao bit his lip. “What is he saying?” He asked Indarias quietly.

Indarias closed her eyes, like she couldn’t bear to see Bosacius like this. “Their names,” she answered. “Antheas, Somnius, Pervases.”

Flowers and dreams spreading throughout.

“I wish someone would put me to sleep in amber,” Bosacius muttered. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

“Bosacius.” Bonanus was unmoving. “Let’s go home.”

“You guys go back without me.”

The lack of energy from Bosacius was unnerving.

“Bo…” Indarias tried.

“I want to be alone for a while, please go.”

The knot in Xiao’s chest was tighter than it had ever been.

Chapter End Notes

Qiqi's Origins/Jiangshi (hopping) Zombie: <https://genshin-impact.fandom.com/wiki/Qiqi/Lore>

I forgot how to link lol. Chill with me on Twitter: https://twitter.com/indertia_

"trauma doesn't go away just because you're tired of it."

Part 2 comes to you NEXT WEEK~ Thank you so so much for reading <3

Love Like Water Ever Flows, Part 2

Chapter Summary

Indarias, stone-faced and silent, was making herself busy over a small fire, preparing some joss sticks and Pervases's favorite grilled fish to burn while Bonanus walked restlessly around the border of the karst, claymore in hand, back and forth and back and forth and back and forth, mouth in an awkwardly tense straight line as if he wanted to speak but didn't know what to say.

Each round that Bonanus made, each time he passed by the clearing where Xiao and Indarias were sitting, he'd stand for a moment and wait with increasing agitation for Indarias to notice him. And each round that he made, Indarias simply refused to acknowledge his presence.

The cycle repeated for what had to be just a couple hours but felt like ages as late afternoon darkened into grey twilight.

Bonanus finally broke the silence first. He pushed his claymore into the ground and allowed it to disappear. "Indarias, I know you have something to say to me, and I wish you would just say it."

Chapter Notes

tw: violence, blood/gore

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

All Xiao wanted to do was make himself as small and invisible as possible.

He sat with his back to the trunk of a tree, knees wrapped as closely to his body as possible and head down.

I wish I were anywhere else.

I wish I was anyone else.

I wish things could be good.

He twisted his fingers into his hair.

The air at Jueyan Karst was physically thick with tension. Every breath was a labor of effort.

No one had quite fully understood that they had lost Pervases. It seemed like he was only out of sight, quiet as ever, and not gone...

Indarias, stone-faced and silent, was making herself busy over a small fire, preparing some joss sticks and Pervases's favorite grilled fish to burn while Bonanus walked restlessly around the

border of the karst, claymore in hand, back and forth and back and forth and back and forth, mouth in an awkwardly tense straight line as if he wanted to speak but didn't know what to say.

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Bonanus finally broke the silence first. He pushed his claymore into the ground and allowed it to disappear. "Indarias, I know you have something to say to me, and I wish you would just say it."

His voice was more gentle than Xiao had heard in a long time.

Xiao kept his head down.

"I have nothing I want to say to you." Indarias lit an incense stick, and the sickly sweet smoke trailed into the air.

"I don't believe that."

"Believe whatever you like."

"I will not stop asking."

"*Ugh.*" There was a sharp snapping sound as Indarias less-than-delicately tossed the incense onto the stone ground. "Fine. If you insist."

Xiao kept as still as possible, turning his head just slightly to look through his hair at his fellow yakshas.

Bonanus stood with his arms hanging awkwardly at his sides as Indarias approached him and took a deep breath in.

Here we go.

"How could you make Xiao do that?" She cried, frustration immediately cracking her voice like she'd been ready to fight. "How, after all you know that he has been through, could you let him do that again? You *know* he's been doing better! You *know* he's been trying to quit! How could you ask that of him?"

Bonanus's voice was trembling with forced calm. "We didn't have any other choice. We had to save the girl. If you care at all about Pervases and what Pervases wanted, then you know that. And Xiao isn't a baby anymore, he can handle it."

"She was just a human!"

"That's why we had to save her."

"No, that makes it even worse!" Indarias's voice grew louder. "Now she's a *zombie*, Bonanus, a fucking zombie, and what is she even going to do now? Whatever that is, whatever she is doing, *that is not life!*" Her shoulders trembled, whether from rage or from sorrow, Xiao couldn't tell. "She is not alive, and she'll never truly live again, and *you made Xiao do that to her!*"

"Would you rather him have just killed her?" Bonanus raised his voice as well. The ground shook

slightly, and Indarias took a step back. “You saw how she died! You know that he killed her!”

Xiao wrapped his arms tighter around himself. *I’m not here.*

“That is not what I said,” Indarias responded defensively. “And don’t you dare use your power against me like that.”

Bonanus folded his arms. “It might not be what you said, but it is why you are fighting with me right now.”

Indarias sighed and looked down. “I hate that this happened to us.”

“You’re blaming me again.”

“I was never blaming you.”

“I can hear it in your voice, Indarias. You’re blaming me again.”

A flush of Hydro energy rippled across the karst, and Indarias hissed through gritted teeth. “That. Is. Not. True.”

Bonanus narrowed his eyes. “You hate me.”

“No.”

“You hate me for falling asleep centuries ago and letting Xiao get kidnapped.”

“No!”

“You hate me for not doing more when Menogias went insane and walked into the Regisvine or stopping Pervases from saving that human.”

“No, no, *no!*” Indarias’s voice pitched up. “Bonanus, stop it!”

Bonanus’s clenched fists started glowing. “You’re blaming me for your precious baby turning into this heartless dream eater, aren’t you? Menogias, Antheas, Somnius, Pervases, and that little zombie dying, and Xiao hating us when he came home, it’s all because of me, isn’t it?”

A fistful of water slammed Bonanus square in the jaw, and he stumbled backwards.

“Why are you punishing me for *your guilt?*” Indarias’s eyes were flashing as she spoke. “*You said you would keep watch that night!* You had one thing to do and you *failed!* You failed me and you failed Xiao, Bonanus, but you’re so stuck on the fact that you failed *yourself* that you never talked to me about it! We could have figured it out, we could have been there for each other, but you distanced *yourself*, and nothing has ever been right since!”

Hydro energy circled her in a sashlike wave.

Xiao had never once seen Indarias go on the offensive like this. She was a healer and a supporter, not a warrior. Since he’d been alive, he’d never seen her even wear her mask.

He stood, very slowly, one hand still on the tree behind him for support.

This is bad.

“You’re wrong,” Bonanus said, wiping the water from his face. He was eerily calm. “You’re

wrong, Indarias. This is Xiao's fault."

Xiao's stomach dropped.

The Hydro energy around Indarias started moving faster. *"Excuse me?"*

Bonanus summoned his claymore, dropping the blade with a sickening thud into the ground. "None of this would have happened if *he never fucking existed*. We would be *free*, Indarias! I never even wanted to agree to this adeptal contract in the first place!" He spread his arms, his voice growing steadily in volume. "We thought Xiao was freed, but all he did was enslave us to Morax! When will this battle end? Have you ever thought about that? Because I have, and *it will never end!* It killed Menogias and the young ones, and that's not my fault! It's *his!*"

He was screaming now.

Xiao's mouth was dry. "Why..." he whispered. "Why are you saying this?"

Bonanus glared at him, and Xiao did not recognize him.

You used to tell me stories, Xiao wanted to say. You gave me my first spear. You taught me how to be strong.

The first voice to ever give me a purpose was yours.

Sound and breath caught like cobwebs in his throat.

"You think he asked to exist?" Indarias cried. "Who prayed for him? Who called him into existence?" She summoned her sword and stepped between Bonanus and Xiao.

Bonanus hefted his claymore in one hand, and his tusked mask appeared in his other hand. "Get out of my way, Indarias."

"We did!" She screamed. "We prayed for him! We begged the archons to give him to us! We wanted him more than anything else! He was everything we wanted him to be, and *you will die before I let you touch him!*"

Bonanus placed his mask on his face, fighting the muscle spasms from the rush of elemental energy, and looked right past Indarias into Xiao's eyes. "Come here, Alatus," Bonanus said, and there was not a hint of emotion in his voice. "Let me put you out of your misery."

Xiao's entire body froze.

In some sick way, he almost felt like this execution was deserved. So many of the things Bonanus had said were correct.

If Xiao hadn't needed to be rescued by Rex Lapis, the other yakshas wouldn't have felt obligated to become adepts and made life-binding contracts. Antheas and Somnius and Pervases wouldn't have existed, but then they wouldn't have died. Menogias wouldn't have gone insane. And Bonanus wouldn't be rushing at him with a broadsword.

I can't think of any good reason to move out of the way.

He closed his eyes.

"No!"

Xiao's eyes flew back open in surprise as Indarias surrounded him with a Hydro bubble that levitated him rapidly out of Bonanus's path.

The Geo yaksha swung his claymore deep into the bark of the tree where Xiao had been standing, growling in frustration through his mask as he tore the blade back out. "Worthless, useless, piece of shit," he muttered. "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you..."

"Xiao, are you okay?" Indarias asked urgently.

Xiao was wildly disoriented. His feet were off the ground and everything was fish-eyed and three seconds ago he had thought he was going to die. He could hear his breaths and heartbeats deep in his eardrums.

He couldn't teleport out or reach the walls of the bubble.

"Indarias," he managed, "let me out."

"No. Stay back, Xiao." Indarias pushed the bubble further away.

Bonanus whirled back around, glowing gold and red with Geo power and karma. "Why are you protecting him?!" He roared at Indarias. "*He needs to pay!* He was the reason for your pain for all those years he was gone! He was the reason you and I lost everything!"

"Don't act like you didn't blame yourself." Indarias said flatly. "You were the one that treated me colder and colder with every day that he was gone!"

"Only because I could *tell* you blamed me for everything!" Bonanus shouted again. "Did you even really love the young ones? Antheas, Somnius, and Pervases?" He advanced forward again, claymore lifted high. "Didn't they only exist to help you find your most precious Alatus?"

Indarias rushed at him and parried the heavy claymore with her own sword, circling to push Bonanus backwards and onto his knees with a blast of water. "How fucking dare you say that to me?" She asked, dangerously quiet.

"I heard your prayers, Indarias!" Bonanus looked up, bracing himself on his sword. The eye holes of his mask had started glowing red. "I know all you wanted were yakshas that could help you look for Alatus."

"In what world does that mean they didn't matter to me?!" Indarias's voice shook, like she was on the verge of crying. "Of course I cared about them! You *know* Alatus was taken from us because he was too powerful, right? What was to stop that from happening again?" Tears slipped from her eyes, and her breath started hitching into sobs. "We prayed for what we needed, and Bonanus, don't act like *you* didn't pray *daily* for the Most Powerful Yaksha Possible when we first started praying for Alatus! Don't act like *you* didn't want him just as much as the rest of us did!"

Bonanus was quiet for a moment. His skin had begun to smoke from the exertion of wearing the mask for so long.

"It's not too late for us, Bonanus," Indarias whispered. The ribbon of Hydro energy around her stilled a bit. "We're still alive. We still have each other, and Bosacius, and Xiao, and this place. It's not too late."

Xiao swallowed the lump in his throat. He still felt upside down, stuck helplessly in Indarias's Hydro bubble, trying desperately to breathe slowly enough to keep himself calm.

Please, Bonanus, he prayed silently. Please give this up.

“No.”

Xiao’s heart sank.

Bonanus lifted his right hand up, and a massive, glowing ball of Geo energy and crystal shards started to collect in his palm. “It doesn’t matter anymore, Indarias. Our karma is *destroyed*. There is no possible way for this life to end in a way that we can be happy.”

This is it, Xiao thought. This is how it ends. And this is how it should be.

This is justice.

“This is justice!” Bonanus shouted, and the Geo blast left his hand.

Xiao watched the blast grow larger and larger as he floated, mesmerized by the golden light...

And then the bubble went tumbling sideways into the flat rock wall of the karst, bursting abruptly and depositing Xiao on the hard ground.

His head was spinning and his ears rang from the impact of the rock.

What happened?

Look around.

You’re not dead.

What happened?

He lifted his head in a daze.

“*Why did you do that?*” Bonanus screamed, and Xiao flinched.

Bonanus’s mask disappeared off his face. He dropped his claymore to the ground with a crash, sprinting over to where Indarias laid on the rock, her body convulsing and crumbling and petrifying with Geo energy. Her eyes widened in shock and pain as her skin started to break apart and splinter, forming fresh wounds that spilled her blood on the ground.

Indarias.

Xiao pulled himself up onto his side, almost falling down again in shock. *INDARIAS.*

“Why, why, *why?*” Bonanus fell to his knees next to her, helping her into a sitting position against the rock wall. “Heal yourself, quickly!”

Indarias shook her head. A thin line of blood dripped down the side of her face, plastering her hair to her graying skin. “It’s too late,” she whispered. “It won’t work.”

“That was *not meant for you!*” Bonanus whisper-screamed back, scrambling to hold Indarias’s hand tightly. His amber eyes were wide, blank, and clouded red with karma.

Xiao’s blood pressure skyrocketed as he realized what happened.

Indarias took the blast for me.

“Bonanus.” Indarias frowned. “Is that what you’re focused on right now?”

“What?”

Lazurite clashed against bloodshot topaz eyes as the last existing Geo and Hydro yakshas looked at each other.

I can’t think.

I can’t feel my hands.

Xiao distantly realized that Indarias was holding her mask.

“It’s not for you to deliver justice, Bonanus.”

Indarias placed her mask on her face. Overwhelming Hydro energy flooded into her hands, forming long, dangerously sharp claws.

“I hope you find peace, my friend.”

It happened in a blink.

In a moment, Xiao heard the sickening *shlk* sound of the claws piercing through Bonanus’s chest.

In a moment, he heard Bonanus scream.

In a moment, the oldest yaksha disintegrated into Geo particles that dissipated into the karst.

Indarias sighed, and her mask disappeared. She turned her head to look at Xiao, wincing in pain as her petrifying neck creaked. “Xiao?”

I can’t think.

I can’t process this.

His face was freezing and trembling slightly. He lifted his hands to cover it.

“Xiao, come here,” Indarias said softly, patting the stone beside her. “Are you okay?”

I don’t know.

I can’t stand.

He dragged himself the short distance across the ground, pulling himself up next to Indarias to rest his back against the rock.

“Do you need healing?” Indarias asked him.

He shook his head, barely croaking out an answer. “No, thank you.”

I wish I could heal.

I wish I could do anything other than destroy.

I wish you would stay with me.

“Xiao,” Indarias said again. “None of the things that he said were true, okay?” She turned her head

to look at him. “We wanted you. We were always happy to have you. You are worth everything it took to have you here, now, next to me. Do you believe me?”

Xiao blinked hard, scrunching his whole face and turning to look at the dark sky that seemed to press down on the peaks of the karst. There were no stars to pin it back in place.

“Yes,” he whispered. “I’m sorry you spent so many years looking for me. Thank you for everything.”

Indarias huffed a laugh through her nose. “I would do it all over again for you,” she smiled. She lifted one slowly petrifying hand. It must have been excruciating, but she didn’t show it. “Xiao, while I still can, will you let me touch you?” Her soft expression didn’t change. “You can say no.”

Some emotion exploded in the pit of his stomach, but not in an adverse way.

“Yes,” he said, and he meant it.

She stretched her arm out around him and he leaned into her side, nestling his head against her shoulder. She lifted her hand to gently comb her fingers through his hair, grazing his scalp and sending comforting tingles across his skin.

He exhaled, and some of the pressure eased off his chest.

“You know,” Indarias thought aloud, quietly enough that she didn’t disturb the peaceful moment. “When you disappeared, I thought my life was over... I thought I had nothing left. It was like my existence had no meaning or fulfillment...” Xiao felt her smile against the top of his head, and she pressed a soft kiss to his forehead. “But I was wrong. My life was already fulfilled the day I met you.”

A dam finally broke in Xiao’s heart.

For the first time in centuries, the tears in his eyes flooded over and silently rolled down his cheeks.

Indarias didn’t see. She rested her head against Xiao’s, still smiling and looking up at the dark gray-blue sky. “My baby, Xiao... I’m so sorry for everything I did wrong. I was wrong so often with you, but I hope you know I always did my best.” Her voice cracked, and he could feel her breath on his scalp.

“I know,” he whispered, blinking tears from his eyes and tasting the salt that burned his anxious lips. “I know you did.”

“You were born to be loved, the way that tears are born to fall, the way that Hydro energy just flows,” she murmured. “It’s a constant. And even after today, it will still be a constant.”

Xiao inhaled a shaky breath, and suddenly he couldn’t stop the sobs from cracking open his chest and sending pressure resonating through the bones in his face, hot torrents of tears falling in rapid drops onto Indarias’s dress, silent screams of hopelessness escaping his throat in whimpers as his shoulders shook.

“Xiao, are you crying?” Indarias turned to press her lips against his hair, holding him a little closer. “Don’t cry.”

He turned in place and threw both arms around Indarias’s neck, clinging to her like a child as the tears continued to flow. “妈妈,” he pleaded. “不要离开我。”

Mother.

Please don't leave me.

“Hey,” Indarias said soothingly. “It’s okay. We’ll be okay, right?” She drew back just a little so that she could look Xiao in the eyes, shimmering water against shining liquid gold.

She smiled fondly, and Xiao felt his heart expand as he nodded and held her close again.

Indarias took one last deep breath, exhaling the familiar haunting melody Xiao knew so well.

*“When your heart feels heavy
Let this song carry you away...”*

Xiao’s voice joined her, singing softly, the music blending with the wind.

*“When the darkness comes
Just know that I’ll be here
Always watching you...”*

Xiao fell forward onto his knees as Indarias dissolved into Hydro particles that whirled into mist and blew away towards the waterfall.

“... I will be right here.”

He hugged his arms to his sides and lowered his head.

And he wept alone.

Chapter End Notes

i love you guys <3

Follow me on [Twitter](#)

[Cover of Indarias's Song](#)

Decided last minute to release my UID: friend me :) let me send you some flowers <3

username: だれか

UID: 609140296

The Last Yaksha

Chapter Summary

He was cursed. He must have been. He was only alive because Zhui, his literal source of torment and trauma, had been a very, very effective teacher on surviving karma and had therefore cursed him to watch as his family died out. It was worse than being chained; it was worse than being burned; it was worse than being apart from them.

Bosacius was still alive, but their last exchange had ended with Bosacius screaming at him to go away before disappearing.

Flames, blood, the shorn tops of reeds, and bits of dead hilichurl swirled around Xiao, striking and bouncing off of his skin. Hilichurl screams filled his ears, louder than the voices, but it all became white noise in Xiao's mind.

If you're just always alone, then technically no one else is ever gone. For all you can continue to believe, the people that you did not watch die are all perfectly fine, living happily somewhere just out of sight.

But unlike Bosacius, Xiao had seen the crushing reality of what happened.

Chapter Notes

Tw: panic/anxiety attack; PTSD flashbacks; slight self-harm

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Why am I alive?

This was the question on Xiao's mind, all the time.

Why do I get to survive?

Life was a punishment, he decided. Life, this wretched, miserable life, was his real karma. He'd spent so long not sleeping and avoiding the hell he deserved that it started overflowing into his waking life.

His mask was freezing against his face, and he huffed in frustration as he swept his spear around him, knocking surrounding possessed hilichurls to the ground. He hardly noticed them over the increasingly eloquent screaming of past victims in his head.

Useless, disrespectful, miserable, good-for-nothing inferior trash, why do you try? We hate you hate you hate you HATE YOU...

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If you're just always alone, then technically no one else is ever gone. For all you can continue to believe, the people that you did not watch die are all perfectly fine, living happily somewhere just out of sight.

But unlike Bosacius, Xiao had seen the crushing reality of what happened.

"Where are they, Xiao? What are you doing... No. It's not true, no! You're lying to me! ... Fuck you, Xiao! Go away! Go away, I don't want to see you!"

Xiao laughed, a short, desperate sound that choked into a scream that caught in his throat.

The material of his clothing clung to his clammy skin, and the scream died in a knot in his chest. He couldn't *breathe*, just thinking, thinking of a tall figure with red eyes standing over him, thinking of iron gauntlets and steel nail guards, thinking of crushing loneliness encased in blackstone dimensions away from everything he knew —

He gasped for air and stumbled, falling to his knees and just barely catching himself with his spear. His vision tunneled and the world caved in, pressing dark skies against him. Through the haze of flame and ash and memory, Xiao's skin streamed into wisps of smoke. "Useless," he whispered, and the curve of his mask brought the words straight to his ears.

You're here, panicking to the point of suffocation over your past trauma, when it's your fault that Ganyu can't be happy, that the little girl in the cavern became a zombie, that Bonanus and Indarias died, that Menogias died, that Guizhong died...

Xiao curled tighter into himself, pulling on his own hair until it hurt. He could sense hilichurls scattering, could feel how easy it would be to go after one and eat its dreams but he refused refused, useless, if he couldn't even do this one thing right then how was he ever supposed to accomplish anything right? *Master*, he thought. *I wish he was here, I wish he would talk to me and bring me out of this, free me from this —*

"*Stop it*," he told himself sharply. The wind cut through his flesh and he shivered, feeling more like a skeleton than a living being as he forced himself to inhale, a shallow breath that cleared his vision just a little.

The field of reeds around him had been cut to shreds; splinters mixed with the drying blood on the ground. Tattered and bloodstained scrolls from the samachurls were littered around him, and the shard of a broken hilichurl mask was cutting into the side of Xiao's leg. He couldn't feel it.

"Useless," he whispered again, a little louder. *Home. I want to go home.*

But where was home?

"Home is not the place. It's the people." Indarias had told him this eons ago in what felt like another life. Home was wherever his family was, wherever he felt loved, wherever he felt like he could be at rest.

Xiao hissed in confusion as the shimmering smoke from his own skin clouded his eyes. *I'm tired. I'm so tired.*

And I have nowhere to go.

He rocked forward onto his knees and curled onto his side, fingers still knotted in his hair, distantly hearing the soft *kshk* of his spear falling on the reeds. He closed his eyes. Pain shot through his temples, pressuring his eyes, driving sharp wires around his limbs and needles into his skin, flooding his whole body with tremors as he struggled to breathe.

Pathetic, miserable wretch, it's all your fault and you deserve this we hate you hate you hate you GOD WE FUCKING HATE YOU —

And then all at once it all disappeared.

Xiao gasped a sigh of relief, immediately releasing the mask from his face and feeling its gentle weight as it settled back at his side. His head and heart seemed to expand from their constriction in the sudden disappearance of pain, and he took another shaky breath, releasing his hands from his hair just a millimeter at a time.

The lovely, clear melody of a Dihua flute floated to him in the wind, which no longer seemed so cold or so awful. The music swept over him and filled every sense, coloring the air he breathed, clearing his vision and hearing, relieving the endless hate until Xiao felt like he was floating. The tune wasn't happy; it was slightly sad, slightly ominous, but still beautiful, raising chills of awe on his skin.

Lovely.

Enchanting.

Releasing.

The music continued long through the night until the first rays of the dawn shone translucent through his eyelids and the soft chirping of birds accompanied the sound.

Xiao exhaled; he hadn't slept, exactly, but he felt rested. He opened his eyes.

Barbatos was standing over him, hat hanging down over his head, Cecilia over his ear, grinning. "Hallo! You look like you need a drink."

Xiao froze in shock, only now realizing that the comforting presence had been the magnitudinal power of the Anemo Archon.

He opened his mouth, gaping like a fish, wracking his brain for the best way to address an Archon that had stayed with him through an entire night, but words totally failed him. "... Hi."

"Would you happen to have access to one?" Barbatos asked casually, twirling the Dihua flute in his hand like a baton.

"What? Oh." *Alcohol.* "No...?" Xiao answered hesitantly. "Could you make it yourself?"

"Pfft." Barbatos waved his hand. "Can anyone just create things?"

It felt like a trick question. "Yes?"

Barbatos burst out laughing. His blue-tipped braids whipped around his face, like they were

laughing, too. “You’re funny! I like you! No, I can’t just make alcohol. I imagine I’d be in a very different state of being. All the time. Ehe.” He grinned again, literally from ear to ear, and flopped down on the smashed reeds next to Xiao. “Anyway, are you alright?”

No. Xiao fought to pull himself upright, and his vision whirled in his head.

The Archon frowned, disappearing the flute in his hand. “Would you like me to go away?”

“You can stay if you’d like to.” Xiao rested his forehead on his hands. *I don’t want to be alone.*

“Okay, I’ll stay!” Barbatos smiled again. “Did you know, one time I stole the Cryo Archon’s scepter and replaced it with a hilichurl club?”

Xiao huffed in surprise, turning to look at the Archon through his hair. “Seriously?”

“No, but you believed me, didn’t you?”

He couldn’t bring himself to smile. Xiao turned his face back towards the ground. *You are now indebted to another Archon who saved your sorry life. Congratulations, you’re a failure.* “Thank you, Carmen Dei,” he said softly, knowing that the Archon deserved more respect than he could manage to give right now.

“You don’t have to call me that,” Barbatos scoffed. “‘Divine Song’ is so pretentious and formal. Do you go around calling Rex Lapis ‘Divine Stone?’ Do people call you ‘Alatus Nemeseos?’”

Ah. Xiao scrunched his eyes shut, exhaling deeply. “How may I address you, then?”

“The humans in Mondstadt still call me Barbatos, but my friends call me Venti. Call me that.”

Xiao chewed his lip. To call on an Archon so casually... *I don’t think you understand how much I cannot do that out loud.* He kept his eyes on the ground when he spoke. “Then... Lord Venti... Why are you here?”

“Five hundred years ago, I left Mondstadt to rule itself,” Venti said simply.

Xiao lifted his head. “What?”

“I didn’t want to be a tyrant. Freedom is best left free.”

He didn’t understand. “What did you do?”

The archon’s crystal blue-green eyes were fixed on the rising sun, eyes wide and smile neutral. “I saved my people from Decarabian, and then I disappeared. My people thought I abandoned them. I wanted them to be the City of Freedom, so I established no ruler or anything and just left.”

There was an undercurrent of sadness, of a long-lost fondness, in Venti’s voice, something that made Xiao believe that they understood each other better than it might seem. “Why did you go back?” *And again, why are you here?*

Venti crossed his legs like a child, planting his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands. “Well,” he said matter-of-factly, “the aristocracy took over Mondstadt, and I returned because a Grand Hero named Venessa called for me. Together we ended the reign of the Lawrence tyrants, and she became the first Dandelion Knight of Favonius. Are you following?”

His head spun a little at all the terms and names. “Yes?”

“At the end of the uprising the tides turned, because the Lawrences betrayed everyone and sold all the people of Mondstadt to Morax as slaves. There was an agreement signed by Rex Lapis, and everyone saw it.”

What?

“The soldiers were furious at the betrayal, and they fought by my side as a result. We won! The End.”

What?! Xiao sat up straight, eyes narrow and defensive. “Sir, Rex Lapis would never do that to anyone, please, Lord Barbatos, you have to know that that wasn’t him! He doesn’t believe in slavery, he would never buy your people for any price, he wouldn’t do that!”

Venti grinned. “Yes, I know!”

Xiao shook his head in disbelief. “What?”

“Mmmm...” Venti’s grin tilted into half a smirk. “A little while after I met Rex Lapis and yourself that day, I learned how to forge his signature because I thought it would be funny, and then I made the fake treaty to win the battles, so... What a happy coincidence, right?” He cocked his head. “Ehe.”

What in Teyvat. Xiao looked him right in the mischievous eye, patience waning. “So... Why... are... you... here?”

Venti leaned backwards, yawning in the sunlight. “Well, I’ve been dying to tell someone this story for five hundred years, and I feel like since I played the flute for you all night, you won’t tell your Archon I forged his signature?”

Pft.

Something like a laugh bubbled in Xiao’s chest and twitched the corner of his mouth, though it died before it left his lips. “Uhhh... Honestly, sir, I am willing to bet that he already knows.”

“Yeah, well...” Venti put a finger to his lips and winked. “Shhhh.”

“I mean.” Xiao’s shoulders felt a little lighter. “I won’t go out of my way to tell him, but if he asks me I’m not going to lie to him.”

Venti giggled, sighing and smiling out at the horizon. The sunlight silhouetted the spires of Dragonspine, warming their skin despite the slightly cool wind rolling off of the mountain. “That aside, I’m also just here because you’re close enough to Mondstadt that I could sense you needed some help. The flute and the story helped you by distracting you, didn’t they?”

He was kind, and not at all prying. Xiao knew that even if he didn’t answer, the Archon would not be upset. “They did help. Thank you.”

“You should learn how to play the Dihua flute, too!” Venti said brightly, summoning his flute again and playing a few notes.

“Oh.” Xiao raised and lowered one shoulder. “It couldn’t hurt, I guess.”

Venti’s expression softened, and a look of understanding crossed his face as he lowered the flute. “Things are terrible for you, aren’t they?”

Xiao closed his eyes. “Yes.”

“You know it’s not wrong for you to find ways to make yourself feel better.”

He shook his head slightly, speaking so quietly he was almost talking to himself. “It’s not enough for the flute to just be louder than the karmic voices. Dealing with karma means accepting the hate of the voices. And... They really know how to hurt me.”

“Yes, but Xiao, you have permission to do what makes you feel better, even if you don’t think you deserve it.”

Wow.

It had been a long time since anyone had spoken to Xiao in such a straightforward manner. He opened his eyes, looking at the Archon in what was probably very disrespectful surprise.

“But you have the freedom to do whatever you want to do! If you choose to, you know, wallow in your emotions and karma, you are definitely free to do that.” Venti was smiling again, in that cheeky manner that Xiao had only ever seen him be.

He wondered how the humans felt about Barbatos as a god. Ganyu had told him before that the people in Mondstadt had established a church, but he couldn’t imagine revering cheeky, bouncy, childish Venti the way that he revered Rex Lapis. “You have an interesting view of freedom,” Xiao remarked softly.

“Well, I’m the Archon of it, and you’re free to disagree with me if you’d like.” Venti stood, stretching his arms up over his head. “I’m going to head out now, if that’s okay with you?”

Xiao raised a hand, and Venti lingered a moment. “What happened to the hero? From the past? Venessa?”

“Oh. She ascended to Celestia.” He made a wry face, mouth slashing crossways over his face and eyes narrowing. “If you learn one thing, Xiao, it’s that the heroes of stories in our world usually don’t get a happy ending. People in Mondstadt remember Venessa as a hero, but it took a long time and horrific trauma for her to get to that point, and honestly, she received the most honor for her life *after* she died.” He looked to Xiao, and any fun emotion he had left was gone. “You fight an invisible war.”

Xiao sighed. “Yes, I know.”

Venti smiled, but it seemed more out of sympathy than anything else, and he seemed to age in front of Xiao’s eyes. “In some ways, there’s freedom in that. If no one knows what you’re doing, there’s no pressure for you to deliver.” He shrugged. “I dunno. Think about that. You’re free to be happy, and you’re free to keep to yourself. Here, you can have this flute I made. I’m keeping the one that Rex gave me.” He procured a dark Dihua flute and tossed it to Xiao.

Xiao caught it easily. It was light but a good weight, smooth to the touch with intricately carved holes along the length of it, simple in the way that a first-time crafter would create but beautiful in the way that only an Archon could accomplish. *It’s too much.* “Thank you,” he said, and the words were wildly insufficient. “For saving me. And for the flute. Thank you.”

Venti seemed to understand. “Play with me sometime, won’t you?” He winked, a little bit of mischief creeping back into his face, and summoned a gust of wind that lifted him up and away.

“Yes.” Xiao turned the flute over, running a finger down to the edge.

The sun had risen higher, casting light across the field of destroyed reeds and blood and hilichurl masks, showing Xiao exactly how much damage he'd done, but he exhaled slowly. He was okay.

He lifted the flute to his lips, blowing a careful note that resonated inside his head.

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Xiao quickly learned that the Dihua flute was the easiest possible instrument to play, generally because the sound was pleasant no matter what note he played or in what order. Combined with almond tofu, it helped him to fight off the urge to hunt for dreams and seemed to overcome the voices of karma, at least temporarily. He could play and get lost in the music, lost in the sensation — maybe not quite the same way that dreams helped him escape — but he could drown out the screams and forget the ever-increasing pain.

Bosacius found him a couple of days later in Jueyan Karst.

It was perhaps more accurate to say he found him *at* Jueyan Karst. Xiao couldn't bring himself to go down into the karst as if nothing had changed. He sat on the edge of the surrounding cliff, looking down into the basin, playing soft notes on the flute when the Electro yaksha sat down beside him.

Xiao faltered when Bosacius sat down, glowing softly purple in the blue hour of the day. The flute in his hands felt kind of silly with his brother there next to him, and he was suddenly shy. "Hi," he said carefully.

"That's beautiful, Alatus, good job," Bosacius replied monotonously.

Xiao flinched as though he'd been stung. He dismissed the flute, leaning forward to look at Bosacius's face; his purple eyes were shiny and wide and blank.

He was suddenly reminded of Menogias.

"Are you... Relatively... Okay, Bosacius?"

Bosacius blinked, slower than Xiao would have liked, but when he turned to face him, he seemed a little more alert. "We still have demons to fight tonight, Xiao," he shrugged. "I have to be okay."

Xiao sighed. As beautiful as the blue hour was, it was just another sign of the impending night. "Tonight, and every night. But Liyue is at peace." He tried for a smile, as fake as it felt. "Rex Lapis has his dinner gathering, the Moon Chase, for the adepti coming up, too."

His brother frowned, and when he spoke it was a growl. "What even is the point of that?"

Xiao sighed. "To celebrate the lives of our friends. To celebrate being alive, and being together."

Bosacius raised his eyebrows, almost all the way into his hairline. "Why should we do that?"

It was a fair point. Xiao did not respond.

"I don't want to go, Xiao." Bosacius put his head in his hands, dropping his lower two arms to the ground beside him. "I'm tired. I just want to sleep. My limbs are all heavy."

Xiao wrinkled his forehead in concern. "Have you been sleeping a lot?"

Bosacius sighed, rubbing his eyes. "Yes, but I'm still tired. And I can tell that you don't really want to go to Morax's thing either. I'm just going to go to sleep."

“You’re free to do the things that make you feel better, Bo.” Xiao said hesitantly, echoing what Venti had told him. “Do you want me to bring you food or tea or something? I can ask Rex Lapis.”

No answer.

Xiao leaned forward, heart pounding a little. “Bo?”

“Huh?” The Electro yaksha’s violet eyes had gone glassy again.

“Bo, we’re going to get through this,” Xiao said firmly. “We’re going to be just fine.”

“Are we?” Bosacius looked down into the basin of the karst.

“It’s you and me, Bosacius,” Xiao tried. “We’re invincible, right?” *Please be okay*, he thought. *Please, please, please be okay.*

“Yeah. Yeah, it is.” Bosacius smiled at Xiao, and Xiao exhaled a shaky breath of relief. “I really don’t know about the Moon Chase gathering, though.” Bosacius lowered himself backwards onto the grass. Any light from the sun had totally disappeared, and the night was upon them. “Do you think we can decide if we’re up to it on the day of? Or is that rude?”

Xiao rotated his wrists, breathing slowly, mentally preparing himself for the long night ahead. “It’s Rex Lapis. He will understand.”

“Yeah, he will. He’s the best.” Bosacius closed his eyes.

Xiao smiled, and it was genuine. Maybe Bosacius would be okay. Maybe he was getting better.

“Be safe tonight, okay, Xiao?” Bosacius said as Xiao got to his feet. “I’m sorry I can’t help, I just... I’m just going to sleep.” His four arms spread out around him, and the Electro glow decreased.

“Yes, I’ve got this.” Xiao replied. *He’ll be okay.* “Will you be here when I come back?”

Bosacius was already half asleep. “Yes, yes. Good night.”

He’ll be okay, Xiao told himself again as he headed off in the direction of the nearest miasma. *He’ll be okay. It’ll be him and me. And when he gets back on his feet, it’ll be life as usual, and we will be just fine, just the two of us.*

We’ll be just fine.

◇ ◇ ◇

When Xiao returned to Jueyan Karst just hours later, Bosacius was already gone.

There was something final about his absence, something that made Xiao feel uneasy and tense.

He forced himself not to panic.

Breathe.

He walked throughout the entire karst from top to bottom, as slowly as he dared, trying to pick up life energy in every direction as far as he could. Long after he knew he would find no one in the karst from the water to the cliffs, he lingered with the sinking feeling he would not be returning.

He could play the flute. He could wait for his brother. He could pretend like nothing was wrong. He was free to do so. He was free to pretend that no one else was ever gone, free to act like he was still happy.

But he couldn't do that, no matter what the Archon of Freedom himself said.

So he left the karst and he walked, walking east in the direction he thought that Bosacius might go, further and further away from West Minlin where his brother usually stayed. The midday sun, usually so comforting to Xiao, just revealed more and more empty plains, the opposite of everything Xiao wanted to see. He walked for hours until his mind was exhausted. He walked with his eyes peeled for a tall four-armed purple-haired figure, his senses on high alert for Electro energy, and the sensation of increasing dread and fear and crushing loneliness churning in his stomach, thinking the whole time, *he wouldn't leave me. He wouldn't. He wouldn't do this to me, after knowing everything I've been through, after everything we've done together, after all of it, he wouldn't leave me. I might have told him that he was free to do whatever made him feel better but he wouldn't leave me. He wouldn't. He wouldn't. He wouldn't.*

And then he saw it.

A beautifully crafted stone sculpture, twice as tall as Xiao, stood in an equally beautiful stone ring, glowing slightly with energy of the adeptal arts. A few crystalflies and butterflies had drawn close to the sculpture, attracted to the elemental energy, but they flew away as Xiao approached.

The stone was intricately carved, with swirls and whorls etched into the smooth surfaces and three triangular divots for some kind of elemental key or actuator to fit in. Xiao stepped onto the stone, and it pulsed once under his foot, but otherwise didn't move.

It couldn't possibly have been created in just the twelve hours Xiao had been gone.

This must have taken Bosacius days, or even weeks, to establish and enchant.

Xiao's vision blurred, and he distantly noticed his face was wet as he approached the engraving in the sculpture:

"My name is Bosacius, one of the Yakshas. I followed my Lord to fight against and contend with pestilence. Yet though we Yakshas had great might, we were bound by our duties, and stained by them. Liyue is now at peace, but of our number, none but Alatus and I remain. And for my part, I wish to depart, to be done with this world. My wealth I leave here, sealed by my arts. If you are fated to do so, take them as you please."

"No, no, no," Xiao whispered. "No, no, Bosacius, no!" He collapsed onto the stone, striking the sculpture with his fists, voice wet and broken and rising into a grating cry. "Don't do this to me! Please! Don't leave me alone, Bosacius, no!" His throat tore open with screaming and his eyes burned and he could feel his knuckles splitting against the stone as his heartbeat roared in his ears, louder than anything, pounding harder than any hurricane as his heart shattered against his ribcage. He was so *stupid*. How could he not have seen this coming? "I'm sorry! I'm sorry. Please come back, Bo, please come back and let me help you, I'm sorry I'm a failure of a brother, anything but this, just *please come back*, I don't want your treasure, I just want you, please, please, *please*..."

Tears and sweat and blood that seeped through the fabric of his gloves splattered onto the stone surface, which just shimmered and cleaned itself, unmarred, perfect, a disgustingly indestructible, undeformable statue that wouldn't budge under the force of Xiao's physical strength.

His vision flattened, and he pressed his head between his hands, gasping for air that would not

come.

I'd rather be burned from the inside out.

I'd rather be immobile underground.

I'd rather face my karma head on.

I'd let Osial do whatever he wants to me.

I'd be a slave to Kimaris for the rest of my life.

Just please please please don't make me go through the pain of losing you, PLEASE, just come back and be here.

“You had *me!*” He cried, crashing his head against the stone, resting his forehead there, feeling the pulse of adeptal energy coursing through it. “If anything, if everyone was gone, Bosacius, you had me, I was here, I was never going to leave you, I was always going to be here! I’ll be anything you want me to be, I’ll be happy, I’ll be good, I’ll be Alatus for you, just *please, don’t leave me alone!*”

The sun beat mercilessly down on his back, illuminating the very large world in bright, burning light, and Xiao felt very small.

He did not know how long he spent kneeling face down in front of the sculpture. Time felt unreal. Hot and cold and dark and light came in waves of what could have been either night and day or Xiao’s blood manifesting his overwhelming loneliness.

It seemed like yesterday that Xiao had been with Bosacius on the hunt for sweet flowers, splashing around in ponds, defeating hilichurls together, gliding for the very first time.

It seems like years, centuries ago that Bosacius came to pick him up from Mount Aocang, still his brother after decades apart, introducing and reintroducing him to the rest of his family.

Time was fake. Time was unreal.

He barely breathed. He didn’t move.

He was underwater.

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Rex Lapis found him late one night, and it was as clear to the archon as it was to Xiao that he hadn’t moved for a long, long time.

As though if Xiao didn’t move, he could bring Bosacius back.

He remained motionless as Rex Lapis walked up to the sculpture, reading the words on the stone tablet before slowly lowering himself to kneel down next to Xiao.

His head hurt, he observed dully. His head hurt a *lot*. But he wanted answers. He wanted to know why this happened, why this was happening to him, why he was alive, why he had to exist all the while knowing that he was just barely hanging onto sanity by a spiderweb.

“Xiao,” Rex Lapis said, gentle but firm. “This is not your fault.”

Xiao’s breath rasped, and he didn’t recognize his own sound. “Is he dead? Is he just away?” He coughed, choking on air and the dryness of his throat. “How could he break his contract like this? Do you feel him anywhere? Is he somewhere we can follow him? Please...” His voice broke, but he was out of tears.

Rex Lapis looked down. “I do not know,” he replied softly, and Xiao dropped his head into his hands. “Wherever he is, he is somewhere I can’t see.”

“Why, why, *why*?” Xiao screamed, more angry than numb at this point. Something sparked in his long-dormant heart. “Why is this happening to me?”

The archon didn’t answer.

Xiao curled his hands into fists, nails pressing into his palms and scabs tearing off his knuckles. “I’ve never done this alone. In the past years, I’ve never faced a Lantern Rite alone or fought a night alone. We always came back together. Always. How am I supposed to go on?” He looked up in desperation. “How am I supposed to do this? *Can* I, even?” He coughed again, hissing in frustration when his voice cracked drily.

Rex Lapis was as steady as ever. “We can call off the Lantern Rite this year. Is that something you would want?”

Breathe.

Xiao forced himself to calm down, bringing his hands together and sinking the sharpest part of his nails into the soft skin on his left wrist, pain clearing his mind just enough.

He wanted to *kill something*. He wanted to stab something. He wanted to rip his spear through the body of something that would suffer and pay for everything that Xiao was feeling, for everything that he had to go through. He wanted to scream until no sound came out and kill until he couldn’t move anymore.

“No. That is not something I would want. I want...”

His voice trailed off, but he clenched his fist, and he knew that Rex Lapis could probably guess the rest of the sentence.

“Would you like backup, or support?” The archon offered. “I would personally help you, if you would like it.”

Xiao closed his eyes and gritted his teeth. He didn’t want solutions. He wanted to be angry. “No. I can handle it.”

They both knew this was true.

“What can I do for you, Xiao?” Rex Lapis asked. “Anything you need, just ask me.”

Xiao snapped. “I don’t need anything! I want... I want to stab something, I want to eat dreams, I want to kill someone, I want...” He slammed his fist against the ground. “I want Bosacius to see how fucking destroyed I am! I want him to see how much I cared about him, I want to tell him, I want to ask him why he left me, and it’s awful, it’s terrible, *it’s so fucking wrong that I will never, ever get to hear the answer!* I don’t want to feel anything anymore, Morax, I don’t even want to *be!* I wish you never saved me because then at *least they’d be alive!*”

It was the worst thing he had ever said aloud, and the first time Xiao had ever addressed Rex Lapis so informally, but he didn’t care. He wanted Rex Lapis to scream back at him. He was panting a little, heart beating rapidly from the outburst and head pounding from the sudden pressure of movement after so long without.

Freedom. *Fuck* freedom. Freedom came with consequences. Freedom came with fallout. Venti’s need for freedom brought down the country he claimed to love. Bosacius’s freedom to do whatever he thought was best left Xiao alone.

“Xiao,” Rex Lapis started to say, “there are still good things —”

“I don’t want to hear the good things!” Xiao hissed, turning for the first time to stare at Rex Lapis, who was infuriatingly stone faced and composed. “Nothing is good right now. *Nothing.* I can’t hear the good things right now.” He shook his head, wilting a little from the gravity of his own words. “It’s not *right* to feel any kind of good when so, so much is wrong,” he whispered.

“You’re right,” Rex Lapis agreed, quiet but firm. “Then. While we can, then let us review the terrible things that have happened.” He took a deep breath, exhaling all the way out before he spoke.

Xiao slumped down on the stone, wrapping his arms around his legs and pulling them close, massaging his temples with his fists.

“Most of the people we love are gone,” Rex Lapis started, “and it’s just us left.” He ticked the list off on his black fingers. “In the past few weeks, Marchosius, the Stove god, sacrificed his power and his memory to heal the land. All Liyuens have evacuated the mines in the Chasm, and where there was once jade as plentiful as the stars, there is now broken ley line and an imprisoned Geovishap king. My oldest surviving friend, the Dendro Archon of the Woods in Sumeru, has died and been replaced by a young god I don’t know, who is *supposed* to be the Archon of Wisdom but has not proven herself to be worthy of the name yet. Barbatos came to tell me that the Tsaritsa in the north has cut off all other archons entirely. Khaenri’ah...” Rex Lapis sighed. “Khaenri’ah has been completely destroyed, and something inexplicably terrible is happening to the remaining Khaenri’ahns. And now all the yakshas are gone except you. You are The Last Living Yaksha.”

The magnitude of an entire nation being wiped out was lost under the crushingly depressing reminder that Xiao had truly never been more alone than he was right this moment, so much so that he was the only remainder of his kind at all.

Rex Lapis reached out to steady Xiao as his head dropped to lean against the stone. Exhaustion settled into his spine, sinking down his nerves and spreading throughout each limb as he reminded himself to breathe.

The heroes in our world don’t get a happy ending, Venti had told him just days ago.

Xiao didn’t need a happy ending.

A happy ending has long since been out of my reach.

The music of the flute and the joy of dreams and the sweetness of almond tofu did nothing to actually help his karma. Nothing would ever truly help him. They were nice ideas, but in the end, that's all they were — distractions meant to drown out the pain that Xiao could never decrease, no matter what he did.

Somewhere in the depths of his soul, he felt his emotions harden, knowing that he had very little now left to lose. Nothing else would break this wall.

I will not go through this kind of pain again.

“My Lord,” he whispered. “You’re not allowed to leave me.”

The archon smiled without any humor. “You’ve never requested anything from me before.”

“It is not a contract,” Xiao responded. The world was dark around the edges, but Xiao felt more conscious than he had for days. “Just a wish. The only prayer to you from the last remaining yaksha. Please.” He met Rex Lapis’s amber gaze, as sincere and cold and stoic as he would ever be. “You are an Archon. You are my Archon, and I answer only to you. You are free to do whatever you want to do, my Lord, but don’t leave me.”

“Alright,” Rex Lapis replied softly. “I will not leave you. I promise.”

They stayed there, Xiao drifting in and out of alertness, until the sun came up on a new day.

Thankfully, blessedly, mercifully, the next five hundred years brought no further loss to the last yaksha.

Chapter End Notes

[Venti Lore/Mondstadt History](#)

[Bosacius's Puzzle](#) : I know how some people interpret his life ending, so imma just remind you all here that this is just my interpretation and you're welcome to believe whatever you want to! This is just what i think happened based on what we know :)

Happy Thanksgiving (to all who celebrate)! I'm grateful for each and every one of you, thank you so much <3

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Surviving

Chapter Summary

The stories of the humans changed and evolved. Humans forgot so easily, and the truth eventually distorted. The story of the yakshas was published, broadly and rather incorrectly, as a book called “Hidden Diamond, Cloudy Moon,” which was such a stupid title that Xiao couldn’t be bothered to pay attention to it, and due to lack of readership even the reverence for the yakshas faded away. The cultural celebration of the Lantern Rite grew every year, even lengthening in time to fifteen whole days, and the people of Liyue continued to find more ways to commemorate their mediocrity.

It was all the same to Xiao, who fought his battles and did his job regardless of thanks or worship. Each night was the same, another night of slaughter and another day of rest at Mount Aocang, one following the other over and over and over.

The painful effects of karma on his body were getting a little harder to ignore; some days his body would seize from the ghost pains of burning on his skin, wires squeezing his limbs, cutting off his circulation, *needles piercing him down to the muscle* — but he meditated. He played the flute. He cut his own hair. The years blended together.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Liyue evolved a lot. The city built itself up until it was renowned in Teyvat for the architecture, cultural significance, and markets. The humans evolved as well, improving the material of their clothing, the method of their expansion, and the increasingly divinity-independent Code of Liyuen Law that added pages by the day. The Qixing cycled in and out. Businesses started. New recipes were created. Ganyu, the secretary of the Tianquan, commissioned statues and shrines of the adepti who had given their lives for the Archon War, and the culture of Liyue embraced them.

Xiao watched it all from a distance as the centuries passed.

The pursuits of humans had never mattered to him. Maybe it should have been impressive that the people who had only just required archonic help to grow vegetables were now a nearly self-sustaining city, but time was just so irrelevant to Xiao that he couldn’t bring himself to care.

Over this irrelevant time, the stories of the humans changed and evolved. Humans forgot so easily, and the truth eventually distorted. The story of the yakshas was published, broadly and rather incorrectly, as a book called “Hidden Diamond, Cloudy Moon,” which was such a stupid title that Xiao couldn’t be bothered to pay attention to it, and due to lack of readership even the reverence for the yakshas faded away. The cultural celebration of the Lantern Rite grew every year, even lengthening in time to fifteen whole days, and the people of Liyue continued to find more ways to commemorate their mediocrity.

For a maybe another century, Rex Lapis had continued to hold his Moon Chase gatherings for the adepti, and the humans had even picked up on *that*. Less and less adepti had been attending the gatherings anyway. Some of them married humans, had children, and assimilated. Some retired,

like Jing. Some disappeared or eroded away peacefully. Regardless of what happened, the number of surviving attendees dwindled and dwindled, and in due course the Moon Chase Festival became purely a human tradition. The shrines and statues of the adepti slowly crumbled into ruins as well, and the way that the Liyuens viewed adepti started to change.

Rex Lapis, in all his dragon-qilin-formed glory, went down to Liyue Harbor every year for a special meeting with the Qixing to discuss the issues of Liyue. The Rite of Descension became a big deal for the people of the city, who welcomed his presence with yet another celebration, all the while unknowing that the Archon had been staying to carry out duties in the city.

It was all the same to Xiao, who fought his battles and did his job regardless of thanks or worship. Each night was the same, another night of slaughter and another day of rest at Mount Aocang, one following the other over and over and over.

The painful effects of karma on his body were getting a little harder to ignore; some days his body would seize from the ghost pains of burning on his skin, wires squeezing his limbs, cutting off his circulation, *needles piercing him down to aching muscle* — but he meditated. He played the flute. He cut his own hair. The years blended together.

There were some moments he remembered, like in the last week when his demon hunt led him to a horde of hilichurls that for whatever reason had looted some human camps in Northern Liyue. Xiao had emerged from the fray and found a child's doll among the broken masks and drops of the hilichurls. For whatever reason, he had made it his side mission to return the doll to its owner, who turned out to be an orange-haired little girl from Qingce village that looked up at Xiao with the widest, most awestruck expression. She had smiled almost giddily, wonder and sparkles in her eyes when Xiao handed her the doll and disappeared without a word.

He didn't need the approval of the humans. But it was nice to have something new to do every once in a while, if only to remind himself that he had the potential to be more than just an emotionless killing tool as the days went on and on and on and on and on.

The one unfortunate change that he *did* care about as the years passed was the humans subsequently creating their own ideas about him.

"The adepti possess a mysterious magical ability that lets them turn into mist and roam in the Sea of Clouds."

"The adepti grant your wishes, more effectively than the archons do!"

"You just need to go to the realm of the adepti in the mountains of Minlin, and they will respect your pilgrimage and give you what you ask for."

What a load of crap.

Mount Aocang, Mount Hulao, and even the outside basin of Jueyan Karst were almost no longer sacred places as Liyuen pilgrims flocked to have their wishes granted and their prayers heard by adepti that barely had the power to do so. Rex Lapis was busy in the city during the daytime, so nowadays when Xiao just wanted some peace, he had to deal with humans coming almost daily to seek him out.

Like now.

Xiao gritted his teeth and rubbed his temples as the human, a thick man in a blue vest, stalked confidently up to the side of the pool and began calling out, "Adepti, hear my prayers!"

He rolled his eyes. He could just teleport away and pretend he was never there to begin with, come back later around sunset — but he didn't want to risk Rex Lapis returning to the peak with an entitled human waiting there, demanding that his prayers be answered.

The audacity. It was better for Xiao to just deal with this now.

He stood with his arms folded, lowering his eyebrows on his searing golden eyes. He nodded in the direction of the human expectantly.

The human put his hands together in what was supposed to look like reverence, but his face quivered in a greedy smile. "O great Adeptus, please give me treasure! Make me rich!"

Xiao didn't move a muscle. "No. Find a job and work for your Mora."

The human blinked. "But... But my leg is hurt!" He whined, taking a step towards the pool with an exaggerated limp that he had not arrived with.

Xiao closed his eyes. "Then pray to Celestia for your leg to be healed and leave."

"But I came all the way up here!" The man complained louder. "I thought that the adepti were supposed to help the people of Liyue! What can you do for me? What are you good for?"

Xiao didn't even dignify that with a response, though it didn't stop him from thinking some horrible thoughts. He squeezed his eyes shut tighter, trying to resist tensing from the stabbing karmic pain in his bones.

Useless human. I should eat your dreams.

"Leave," Xiao repeated, allowing a subtle threatening tone to color his voice.

The man scowled audibly and mumbled something under his breath, but within a few moments, Xiao could feel his energy descending the mountain again.

That two-minute interaction had taken all of Xiao's emotional energy for the day.

Xiao poured himself a cup of zhenxinsan and sat at the table, eyes still shut, trying to drink his irritated headache away. People like that broke the days up, but they weren't ever worth it. There were so many of them; given time, they too would just melt into the days with the frequency that they appeared.

He was happy, though, that when Rex Lapis returned to the mountain not long after, there were no humans around to bother him.

The archon just about dropped into his seat at the table, and Xiao was quick to pour him a cup of the calming liquid. "Are you alright, my Lord?"

Rex Lapis sighed heavily, downing the cup in one pass. "Xiao, I would be happy to never, ever, ever see another piece of raw seafood for the rest of eternity."

Xiao arched one eyebrow as he refilled the teacups. "Excuse me?"

"The people of Liyue collectively made a request to me as their archon," Rex Lapis said, and the weariness was evident in his voice. "They asked me to wipe out this citywide infestation of these tiny tentacled terrors." His eyes went wide and serious as he looked at Xiao. "They are awful, Xiao. They are the worst. They come straight from the bowels of Osial. They are squishy. They

are slimy. They secrete the foulest thing I have ever smelled. They are everywhere, and... they're just so gross!" The archon's conduct shifted, and he made a childishly sour face. "I've been slowly working through this extermination job for months now, and I think the smell has fully engrained itself into my clothes." He threw back another cup of tea and sighed.

Xiao smelled the air carefully and caught a whiff of a sick, steamy scent, like hot wet salted dog droppings, and his forehead wrinkled in revulsion. "Do you need help?"

Rex Lapis's sour expression deepened. "Honestly, no, but I want to say yes. This is the most mundane thing I've ever done. I'd rather kill just one big monster than have to deal with this. It's not like I can just 'Wrath of the Rock' all the tiny tentacled terrors without wiping out the entire city," he groaned. "It is so difficult to guarantee to anyone that I have truly found every single one of them. In order for me to prove that they have been fully exterminated, I have to check *every little crevice in all of Liyue Harbor*, in every spine of every book, in every crack between wood chairs and tables, in the pencil cases of schoolchildren and the shipments into and out of the jewelry store. It's not impossible, but it *is* a nightmare. These little terrors are *everywhere*." He dropped his head into his hands. "Can we discuss something else?"

Xiao bit back the urge to smile. "What else is on your mind?"

Rex Lapis straightened in his seat, and the mildly exasperated humor that had filled his amber eyes melted into a serious look. "Xiao, I am very sorry that I haven't been around here. I've been needing to do more things in the city, and much of the time it is simpler to work through the days and stay the nights there. It's not that I do not appreciate your offers to help, but I don't want you to be a part of too many of my responsibilities. Your job is to protect Liyue from demons, not to get wrapped up in interarchonic politics."

Xiao nodded. He really, truly did not feel bad about Rex Lapis being busy. "Yes, my Lord, I understand. You don't have to apologize. I've been surviving."

The archon's eyes narrowed slightly. "What can I do to support you further, beyond just being here with you in the daytime? Or taking you with me to the city?"

Xiao scoffed. "I would hate that."

Rex Lapis grinned. "I know you would."

Xiao sighed; he could already imagine Rex Lapis telling him that "surviving" and "living" were not the same, and Xiao should accept the support he was being offered.

What would help me the most? What do I need to get through the days?

The answer came to him more easily than he expected.

"I think I need to leave this place," Xiao said in a small voice.

Silence hung tangibly in the air.

Then a look of understanding crossed Rex Lapis's face. He tapped his fingers on his cup, and his thumb rings clinked against the ceramic.

Mount Aocang.

Xiao's first home away from captivity.

He shook his head. *I'm not attached to this place. Memories are just memories. They erode like the mountain and everything else does. It's been centuries.*

It's time to go.

"I think it would help to find a place where the humans can't reach me," Xiao mused. "It isn't that I dislike this mountain. I love this mountain. But you aren't really here anymore, and there's an awful, entitled human at least once a day." He cleared his throat. "If I could find a place where I could be closer to you and also have the days to myself so I could properly prepare for the nights, that would be all I need. I would like a place where I can be certain that I'll be left alone."

"Mmmm..." Rex Lapis hummed thoughtfully. "As many memories as this place has, and as sacred as it is, I agree that it's too easy for humans to just trespass here. I'm thinking of giving Cloud Retainer free rein to make the abode her own. That would provide a perfect opportunity for us to find you somewhere new, and also allow Cloud Retainer to mortal-proof the place to her own liking..."

Archon and yaksha shared a knowing look, both aware that Cloud Retainer would spare no expense in keeping the mountain sacred.

Xiao could almost hear the mechanics of Rex Lapis's brain working as he thought, and a feeling of assurance calmed Xiao's nerves.

He's not angry with me. He's helping me.

What a privilege, and what an honor it is, to be known and loved by the Archon of Liyue.

"Okay." Rex Lapis stood. "I have an idea. I will get back to you as soon as I can." He smiled encouragingly at Xiao, and Xiao nodded back. "Have a safe night."

"Thank you," Xiao responded, and Rex Lapis disappeared in a pulse of Geo energy.

Xiao looked around at the peak of Mount Aocang, leaving the table to climb up to the highest point and watching the sun set in the west. He spread his glider open as the night consumed the sky, flying across the flat of the mountain in the direction of the nearest miasma, and he couldn't help but look down at the table under the tree in the center of the pool.

If looked closely enough, he could imagine the dust shifting, coming together to form the beautiful form of a loving goddess...

Stop.

He tore his eyes away, impatiently shaking off the premature despair that had threatened to take over his limbs.

He only ever spoke to Rex Lapis now, and it was perfectly fine with him. He was okay being alone.

He was safer being alone.

◇ ◇ ◇

"Trust me," Rex Lapis whispered.

Xiao tried. He really did.

But Rex Lapis, the *Archon of Liyue and Geo itself*, asking *humans* for *assistance* was potentially the most ridiculous thing Xiao had ever seen, and Xiao had seen many strange things.

A large stone pillar, made by the Geo Archon, had appeared in Dihua Marsh, and the Developmental Head of the Qixing had constructed a very noticeable, very elaborate building all around it. The top of the building was whole stories up in the air, about half as high as the mountains that Xiao was used to, and the golden leaves of a ginkgo tree peeked out over the glazed tiles of the roof.

It was beautiful, but Xiao felt some lingering unease.

“Xiao, I want to introduce you to the Qixing who made this project possible,” Rex Lapis said, gesturing to a startlingly young girl with purple hair tied in twin ponytails and diamonds of fire in her eyes and a slightly older, expensive-looking woman with a Geo Vision and three nervous-looking attendants around her. “This is the Yuheng of Liyue Estate Development, Keqing, and the Tianquan of Liyue Law and Justice, Ningguang.”

The Tianquan’s heeled shoes scraped the ground as she stepped forward and extended her hand. “I am Ningguang. It is a pleasure to meet you,” she said, voice sugary sweet and almost exaggeratedly respectful.

Xiao immediately recoiled, darting partially behind Rex Lapis. An old panic rose in his throat, and he clenched his jaw so tightly that his skull throbbed.

The Tianquan’s eyes were red and bright; her hands were topped with multiple steel nail guards, sharp and glinting in the morning sunlight; her tone was just light enough to set off every possible alarm of past trauma in Xiao’s brain; wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, *wrong*.

His hand trembled and flew to clutch at his mask, holding it securely to his side.

Why did she have a Vision? How was she the one in charge of all the Qixing? Why did she have to be here now, why did she have to wear guards on her nails, *why did she have to speak like that* —?

“Xiao,” Rex Lapis started, realizing just a little late who Ningguang might have reminded him of. “Xiao, wait—”

“Ningguang, you might think yourself to be divine, but even you should know better than to just approach an adeptus so boldly.” Keqing interrupted to reprimand the Tianquan, not even bothering to look up from the building plans she was reviewing. “Why don’t you back off, or better yet, return to the city and allow me to do the job that is my delegation?”

The Tianquan stepped back away from Xiao quickly, putting her hands behind her back. “I meant no disrespect,” she said, still in that sugary tone, although all those present could tell that this was not her first disagreement with her coworker.

Breathe.

Xiao released his mask, frustrated that such an ancient memory still held sway over him now, cursing himself internally for allowing himself to show any signs of weakness in front of a human, hiding behind Rex Lapis like he was a toddler. The Tianquan hadn’t even done anything wrong, just spoken and looked the way she did, which was all out of her control.

It won’t happen again.

Don’t you dare let that happen again.

He looked away from the Tianquan.

“I am the Yuheng,” Keqing said simply, and she could have been talking to anyone at all. “This is the Wangshu Inn, constructed and established to be whatever you need it to be.” She lifted her eyes respectfully but she did not force Xiao to meet her eyes, and he was grateful. “We had initially planned for you to take the very top floor. Do you have any special requests?”

She couldn’t have been more than fifteen years old, but Xiao already appreciated her more than most humans he’d ever met.

He could see the effort that had gone into the top floor of the Wangshu Inn, and he privately thought that it could not have been a coincidence that she’d chosen to plant a ginkgo tree there, just like the one at Mount Aocang. She must have been ensuring that he would feel comfortable and at least kind of at home.

He fought to make sure his voice was steady, even if it sounded forced. “I do not like being enclosed in any space, or being indoors in general, and I do not want to be anywhere that humans could access me at all.”

That includes you, the Qixing.

Keqing seemed to understand. “Alright, that’s perfect. You can stay on the top floor, and we will mark it as off limits to all guests with no exceptions. Not even myself or the owner of the inn will be able to bother you. There’s a lovely view of Liyue from the rooftop, and it could double as a watchtower for you as well.” She turned back to the plans in her hand and started rattling off other points: “If it pleases you, this is a place where traveling merchants can stay as well, central to Liyue but not too far from the city, and can act as an information hub so that there is a central intelligence. I will keep old records here so that it will seem as though the inn has a long history, and no one will think anything suspicious of it.” She flipped a page. “And, this may not be impressive to the adepti, but the Wangshu Inn boasts of having the first ever water-wheel elevator.”

Rex Lapis smiled reassuringly at Xiao, who exhaled evenly as his heart rate returned to normal. “This is only one option,” he said, softly enough that the humans couldn’t hear. “If you decide that you hate it, you are not bound to it. You are not bound to any place.”

Xiao hesitated a moment, looking up again at the roof of the inn. It was close to the city, where Rex Lapis would be. It was high up enough that he would be out of reach of most people, and the Yuheng had guaranteed him absolute privacy. *Maybe.*

“How will you explain how a colossal stone pillar just appeared in the middle of Liyue? In Dihua Marsh, no less?” The Tianquan asked Keqing, posing a suspiciously innocent question in a suspiciously innocent voice. “Will the citizens buy that?”

“We will say that this is a recently surfaced pillar from the past.” Keqing answered without missing a beat. “We will say the people in the past would stack stones to make platforms above the marsh floods, and this is just one that we have recently excavated. It will not look like an intelligence agency.”

Ningguang just stared at her, expression unreadable.

Keqing frowned. “It won’t!”

“Careful, Yuheng,” Ningguang said, just a hint of a taunt in her voice. “This is your first and

biggest decision as the Overseer of Developmental Direction. Have you covered every track?"

Xiao crossed his arms. *Why must this human speak so condescendingly? What has changed with these humans so much over the years that they dare to speak like this in front of their Archon?*

Then Keqing smiled airily, looking past Ningguang and right into Rex Lapis's eyes. "I have covered every possibility. I have already set Ganyu writing articles on the past periodic flooding of Dihua Marsh, and I have prepared the necessary archaeological excavation forms. Every angle has been covered. Lord Rex Lapis, you can trust me!" Her eyes flashed, and Xiao heard Rex Lapis chuckle quietly. "I have done all the necessary research, and this is the wisest approach."

The archon smiled at her. "I know, Yuheng. This is the perfect answer to my request. Well done."

Keqing glowed from the praise and beamed in satisfaction before looking at Xiao from the corners of her eyes, as if gauging his response.

Xiao cocked his head slightly. He could tell that she viewed him almost explicitly as a powerful adeptus, but there was some wariness and just a little bit of concern in her unyielding quartzite gaze.

She fought for this. She respects me. That's the best I can ask for from a human.

Without a second look, he teleported to the top of the inn.

The floorboards were solid, sweet-smelling Cuihua wood, and he couldn't hear a sound through their insulation. Ginkgo leaves floated on the wind past him. He could see for miles in every direction, making reconnaissance and teleportation even easier. There were a few potted plants arranged around the balcony, and just inside the building (but not out of sight of the open sky), Xiao found a closet stocked full of thick silk-lined blankets that he didn't necessarily need but had a wonderful texture.

It was quiet. It was convenient. It was *private*.

And it was just for him.

Don't get too attached. This cannot last forever. This is not your home.

But it could be.

Just for a minute.

Xiao breathed out, and some of the tension left his face.

◇ ◇ ◇

From the roof of the inn, Xiao could physically see the world changing around him. He settled relatively painlessly within the next couple of years.

Huai'an, the innkeeper, was very respectful of Xiao and religiously protected his privacy, going so far as to spread rumors and local myths along the Liyuen street market. Before long, every vendor in Liyue Harbor was passing around seven or eight different theories of "The Mysterious Secret of the Wangshu Inn Tower," each one more ludicrous than the last:

"The roof is where the innkeeper and his family live personally, and that's why no guests are allowed in there."

“No, no, no. There is a secret swimming hole up there for Very Important Guests, and it isn’t open to the public so that no one will be able to steal the unpatented technology used to pump water up so high.”

“You’re both wrong! It’s haunted by ghosts! That’s why no one is allowed up the stairs; because they’ll get eaten by ghosts!”

“I thought that the Wangshu Inn was a front for the Qixing to spy on the people and keep their secret adeptus.”

“Now that is actually the most asinine thing I have ever heard.”

Each vendor would swear up and down on the name of Morax that they had heard the truth directly from the lips of the innkeeper, and everyone else was wrong.

In the meantime, Huai’an would keep his respectful distance from Xiao, but his brown eyes twinkled whenever he caught a glimpse of the yaksha.

Huai’an’s wife, an alleged Mondstadter woman named Verr Goldet, was a very kind and assertive woman that claimed ownership of the inn itself. Guests would receive their room keys from her and take at face value that she was just an exotic entrepreneur from another country that found a perfect need for an inn in Liyue and was very successful.

Unlike the humans, Xiao had noticed within the first year that Verr Goldet had no Mondstadt accent, but that was none of his business. She ensured that Xiao had perfect privacy, and anything else about her was not his concern. She also made almond tofu, which wasn’t as good as Rex Lapis’s but was still delicious, and every few days she left a plate by the kitchen for him to take at his leisure.

Through this whole arrangement, Xiao did not exchange a single word with either human.

He still fought his invisible war every single night. He still remained acutely aware that no one would ever thank him for his history or notice all that he had sacrificed for the safety of Liyue. He still refused sleep and fought off the effects of karma with music and almond tofu.

But at least he could live without attachment, without fear of losing more than he’d already lost.

Rex Lapis still came to visit him every few days, bringing updates from the city that Xiao didn’t really care about, but he was satisfied to see the archon enjoying his life with the humans. Rex Lapis was still as regal as ever and held himself with the confidence that could only accompany a god, but he’d extended white sleeves onto the robe he usually wore, covering up the luminous Geo energy that pulsed from his dark arms.

They stood on the balcony in the later afternoons, leaning against the railing, drinking some kind of caffeinated tea and looking out over the Liyue landscape. Xiao rested his head on his folded arms, listening passively but content to just be with Rex Lapis.

“Do you remember telling me about the doctors that found a way to combat karma through cremation?” Rex Lapis asked him. “Over the last centuries, they’ve strictly become undertakers and morticians. They’re smart and traditional, and surprisingly accurate when it comes to cultural significance. I went covertly to take a tour of their facility today, and they displayed a lot of care for maintaining customs. I was impressed.”

Xiao rolled his shoulders. “I don’t understand how they don’t recognize you, my Lord. There are five statues throughout Liyue that look just like you. If they’re so culturally savvy, they should

probably know that.”

"Aha." Rex Lapis laughed awkwardly, and Xiao shrugged again with a rueful look. The Five Statues of Morax displayed the archon reclining against a few Geo steles with only a cloak around his shoulders and wrapped around his waist, leaving his torso bare. The sculptor had paid very careful attention to the abdominal muscles of the stone, but missed some other very defining features of the god down to the long hair and dark arms. “Those statues were made a long, long time ago, and I can take different forms, Xiao.”

“Mm.”

He went on. “The 76th Director of the Parlor died a few years back, and his very young granddaughter took over the business at just thirteen years old. I met her today! Her name is Hu Tao, like “walnut.” She is seventeen now, and she is very bright.” Rex Lapis nodded approvingly in the direction of the city. “Humans are so intent on evolving and making themselves better. They succeed at such young ages, and then they keep reaching further. It’s wonderful.”

Xiao huffed a quiet laugh through his nose. A thought crossed his mind, and he turned to look at Rex Lapis. “Is she an allogene?”

Rex Lapis blinked innocently. “Perhaps.”

“How long has she been an allogene?”

“Maybe four years.” The archon smiled.

“Ha.” Xiao turned back out towards the land. “I can’t believe she’s an allogene when Keqing isn’t.”

“What?” Rex Lapis raised his eyebrows. “Keqing has a Vision. She is an Electro user.”

What? “She is?”

Rex Lapis hummed and took a sip from his teacup. “She doesn’t want it, though she’s far surpassed being worthy of it. She thinks that people credit her Vision for her capabilities and not her own head, as if she needed archonic blessing to be a good Yuheng.”

Stupid, Xiao thought, tscking his tongue. Such a shame that in the end, human logic was so flawed and so limited, even from the human that he had respected the most. The already-miniscule bit of admiration that he’d thought he had for Keqing twisted away in his heart, and he frowned, shaking his head. “What else is going on?”

“Hmm...” Rex Lapis thought for a moment. “A man in Mondstadt named Crepus Ragnvindr lost his life after using something the Seven have dubbed a ‘Delusion.’ It’s a false Vision that allows humans to harness godly power without any blessing from Celestia, but at the cost of their own health.”

Xiao glanced up at the archon, noting the heavy line of concern between his eyebrows. “Is that something you need to be worried about?”

“Ehh.” Rex Lapis shrugged, taking another sip of tea. “I’m more curious about the source of the Delusions than I am about this one man’s death, but you don’t have to worry about it. We should be fine.”

Xiao tilted his head. He didn’t buy it; the archon’s knuckles were pale around the teacup.

“We should be fine,” Rex Lapis repeated, turning to Xiao. “I have been talking all this time, but how are you, Xiao? Do you have anything new to tell me?”

It was a silent request to let the subject go.

“Nothing really new,” Xiao answered, trying to come up with a story if only to help change the topic.

Sometimes my karmic debt presses needles into my skin. Sometimes I think about what I've lost and it ruins me. Sometimes I wish things could go back to the way they were before I met you, because it was easier and every day of life is pain.

“There was an uncorrupted spirit, a young girl that appeared around here, but I didn't hurt her. She's harmless. I left a note for Verr Goldet and Huai'an to leave her alone, too, but if she gets corrupted, of course I will carry out my duty.”

Rex Lapis looked on expectantly, as if waiting for Xiao to go on, but that was it. That was the end of the story. The archon took a deep breath, nodding slightly as Xiao leaned against the railing again, pushing his body forward to feel the breeze a little better.

“Are you doing alright?” he asked, the same way he did every time.

“I'm surviving,” Xiao answered, the same way he did every time.

Rex Lapis nodded in resignation, and the two of them turned in sync to watch the sun set over Dihua Marsh. “Okay.” He smoothed his thumbs over the now-empty teacup, and his rings made a soft whispery sound. “We are surviving. And Liyue is flourishing. All is well right now, Xiao.”

Xiao nodded.

Things were not bad. He kept his expectations low. He kept his attachments far from his heart. He could watch the nation change around him while he stayed forever the same, forever fighting the same war, maybe not happy but at least not hurting.

“Yes.”

Chapter End Notes

[Adventurer Theories About Adepti](#)

[Returning a doll](#)

Thank you for reading <3 I'll be honest, I'm kind of slowing down and I feel like I'm losing my touch with this, like I'm not giving Xiao justice and I really wanna be proud of it >_> I'm gonna finish this, but I really hope it doesn't suck and it'll be in like a good amount of time. THANK YOU FOR STICKING WITH ME.

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The Things I Remember

Chapter Summary

He closed his eyes as he approached the lip of Jueyan Karst. The sound of the waterfall and quiet cricket chirps was familiar and refreshing, and the dawn sunlight was soft through the misty air. Xiao breathed in deeply, feeling his energy replenish a little. For a moment, he could imagine that things were good and he was happy, as if it was his first time seeing Jueyan Karst in his life, as if he could sit on the cliff and swing his legs and smile as careful hands brushed his hair...

Xiao's eyes flew open and he frowned. These kinds of thoughts and memories had no place in the present. He shook his head, glaring into the basin of the karst...

Then he blinked. He moved closer to the edge of the cliff, squinting.

A tiny purple figure was climbing up the side of the karst, moving awkwardly and abruptly, scuttling up the stone face like an insect.

Chapter Notes

tw; self harm

see end notes for an announcement please~

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Another year passed, irrelevant to Xiao, exactly the way that he wanted it to be. Nothing really changed; at one point he rescued an adventurer from a hilichurl horde right outside the inn, causing a mass panic among the patrons of the inn while also garnering more business from people who wanted to see where it happened. It was the most interesting thing that happened in Liyue for months.

Rex Lapis told him a couple weeks later that the adventurer had subsequently retired from adventuring and opened a grocery store in the city. The Adventurer-Turned-Grocer's experience had been the talk of the town, and he was wildly successful in his business. He named his shop "Second Life," telling every customer who asked that he would never venture out again because "a masked adeptus had given him a second life."

Xiao had snorted at that. He literally shuddered in revulsion imagining all of the newfound worshippers that probably flocked to Minlin after that, hoping that an adeptus would save them, as if Xiao had cast some sort of magic that was solely responsible for the success of the grocer. Human matters were stupid, and even the most devout followers of Rex Lapis made human mistakes. He only had to wait for the moment that Rex Lapis would come and tell him about how Dongsheng the Second Life owner had been charged with price gouging or tax evasion.

He kept these thoughts to himself, rolling his eyes over the almond tofu he was sharing with Rex

Lapis. “What else is new?”

The archon conscientiously scraped a goji berry off the top of the almond tofu. “Well, the jiangshi zombie from ages ago is awake.”

“*What?*” Xiao shouted, and Rex Lapis jumped and dropped his spoon.

“Volume, please!” Rex Lapis exclaimed. “I said, the zombie that the adepti made and sealed in amber five centuries ago has awoken.”

The zombie.

The human that Pervases had given his life in battle to save.

The creator of the last dreams he had ever eaten.

The little girl who had gone swimming with her mother and wanted more than anything to live happily and protect those she loved.

She was awake.

Xiao chewed nervously on the inside of his cheek. He could remember everything, could remember the child’s magenta eyes and shrill, crying voice as blood streamed from her tiny body, could remember the memories of love and family in her dreams —

Guilt and concern bubbled in Xiao’s chest, and he tried to suppress it. He had no reason, no real actual emotional reason, to feel anything for the zombie. She was just a human that had died as a casualty and been revived. Humans died all the time, and her death was an accident, and he’d been *commanded* to eat her dreams, so it wasn’t even as though he had anything to connect him to the zombie. He had nothing to apologize for.

He drummed his fingers on his knee. “How did it happen?”

Rex Lapis spread his hands out in a half-shrug. “From what I have heard, the amber that she was sealed in was harvested by a few of the undertakers from the Wangsheng Funeral Parlor. The amber was knocked around in transit, and the zombie escaped during the night. Considering that the seal was so old *and* that she is an allogene, I’m surprised it didn’t happen sooner.” He stole a quick glance at Xiao, who worked to keep his face neutral. “My understanding about reanimations is fairly limited, but if I’m right, she’s a very special little zombie. Most reanimations are awoken by their masters, but she woke herself and therefore has no master. Zombies *must* follow the orders of their master, but if she has none, I don’t know if this means that anyone can give her orders, or that no one can give her orders.”

Xiao clenched his hands into fists. *I don’t care. I don’t care about the zombie. I have no connection to her. I can just let the matter go now.*

He wrestled with the guilt for another moment. “Where is the zombie now?”

The archon sighed, and his eyebrows knit in disapproval. “Baizhu of Bubu Pharmacy found her shortly after she broke out the amber, and he took interest in her and took her in. Hu Tao reports that the zombie now answers to the name Qiqi.”

Xiao squeezed his eyes shut. He hadn’t heard a human name in the zombie’s memories, but it seemed so sad and so *wrong* for her to so easily now answer to a new name that might not suit the kind of person she had been. Liyuen syllables had all kinds of definitions, and Xiao considered the

possible meanings. *Qiqi*. “Which *qi* is this? *Qi* as in energy?”

“No, it’s *qi* as in ‘seven.’”

The zombie’s name was Seven Seven.

Stupid.

Xiao sighed. “I don’t like the sound of that.”

“I know what you’re saying, but neither do I,” Rex Lapis lamented. “Baizhu is not the most upright of people. I have no reason to believe that he cares about the zombie. I’m sure he has some kind of ulterior motive for taking her in. The reality at hand is that he gives her a job, and he knows better than anyone else in Liyue Harbor how to help her take care of her body. Jiangshi zombies have to fight off rigor mortis, and even I know very little about that.” He crossed his arms. “I know the reality of the situation, but I do not have to like it.”

It’s fine with me as long as she isn’t just running amok, Xiao told himself. I don’t care what happens to her. I don’t care that her name is stupid. It doesn’t affect me. It doesn’t bother me.

It doesn’t.

“Did anyone say anything about the zombie’s memory?” Xiao asked, looking away from Rex Lapis, casually examining his Vision on his hand.

Rex Lapis pressed his lips together. “All I know is that it is very short,” he responded carefully. “Baizhu has successfully implemented himself into her long-term memory, but she will easily forget people she doesn’t see often and daily events that are not repeated. I don’t know how short it actually is, or what it takes to become a part of her long-term memory. Xiao...” He paused for a moment, as if hesitant to go on.

Xiao folded his arms and would not meet the archon’s eyes.

“It was an accident, Xiao,” Rex Lapis said. “No one holds it against you. You don’t —”

“It’s *fine*, thank you,” Xiao interrupted.

Rex Lapis frowned, and he immediately backtracked.

“Sorry. For interrupting you. Thank you,” he mumbled, dropping his eyes to the unfinished lump of melting almond tofu between them. “I’m sorry, my Lord, but it’s fine. It’s better off not remembering the things that happened back then.”

Xiao wasn’t sure if he was referring to the zombie or to himself. He massaged his temples, closing his eyes tightly. There was a sting in his heart and rising pressure in his skull.

“Mm.” Rex Lapis cleared away the remains of the dishes with a wave of his hand. “Regardless, I’m going to be on the lookout for her, and I have told the adepti to keep an eye on her if she ever wanders into their territory,” he said firmly. “She might be a zombie, but she deserves to have a good life just as much as anyone else in Liyue.”

Xiao’s teeth tore at a piece of his lip. “Of course.”

The zombie didn’t know him.

It couldn’t remember him.

It didn't know that he was the only person who could possibly know anything about its life.

I don't owe it anything. I don't care about it at all.

"Xiao." Rex Lapis tapped the railing. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Nothing. Don't worry about me. I will be on the lookout as well."

Even as he said these words, Xiao carefully guarded his heart, pushing the memory of the zombie's dream out of his mind. *Don't be concerned about it. Don't think about it. All I need is right here. Dreams or not, it has no connection to me. Liyue is a big place. The odds of me seeing it are very slim.*

I hope I never see it at all.

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The following months brought a new year, which in turn brought another Lantern Rite, another fifteen nights that consisted solely of slaughter. Hilichurls, samachurls, mitachurls, lawachurls, whopperflowers, both immature and adult vishaps, and at least two Regisvines were all intent on heading towards wherever there was celebration; mobs appeared at different times throughout the night in Qingce Village, at Guyun, and at the outskirts of Liyue Harbor, and Xiao could only try to be everywhere at once. Lanterns floated into the sky over his head, but his eyes were always on the ground.

By the final night of the festival, he was fully exhausted and clinging to consciousness. He had the same complaint every year that if the monsters could just *spread themselves out over the days* instead of all attacking at night, or all attacking at this rate for these two weeks, it would be so much easier to handle the Lantern Rite.

There were less festivities in Minlin, where the inhabitants were either other adepts or adventurers that were expected to take care of themselves, but a few stray lanterns had dotted the sky and attracted another mob of hilichurls with shields and clubs.

At least they didn't have fire. He hated getting burned.

Xiao stabbed his spear into the last hilichurl of the night, and its screeching abrasive scream barely registered in his mind as it disintegrated into sparks. He reflexively slashed his spear through the hilichurl mask that dropped, trying not to breathe too heavily as the dust settled. Some ashes drifted into his throat regardless, and he coughed, wincing at the pain in his ribs. He wiped what he thought was sweat from his forehead and grimaced when his hand came away red.

Thank Rex Lapis, dawn finally broke, and the Lantern Festival was finally over.

Xiao looked around, shoulders heaving and twinging with every breath. He dropped heavily onto the grass at the base of a Sandbearer tree, letting his spear fall to the earth and leaning his head back against the trunk and stretching his legs out as he looked around. He was in Huaguang Stone Forest in Minlin, between the peaks of Mount Aocang and Mount Hulao. He was deeply familiar with this area; it wouldn't have been a bad place to rest for a while. Through the burning scent of dead hilichurl, Xiao could smell sweet flowers, Qingxin, cold water, and Jueyan chilies.

It was just a little too close to what used to be home. The stinging ache of karma cut at his wrists and throat, and he impatiently rubbed at the phantom feeling.

He closed his eyes, picturing Wangshu Inn, willing himself to be there — and promptly gasped

aloud as the pain that shot through his temples almost knocked him out. The strain of teleporting was too much for Xiao after nearly sixteen hours of nonstop combat.

Well.

He pulled himself to his feet, ignoring the sting of his slowly healing cuts and battle wounds. A glide and walk halfway across the country was nothing compared to the endless battle of the last fifteen days.

The walk down and east from Qingyun Peak was surprisingly easy. The beast adepts had established a domain at the center of the pool in Jueyan Karst over the centuries, mostly in attempt to give the humans a “trial” to “pass” in order to “prove themselves worthy,” but humans had found the gall to build a stone staircase and set up multiple pathside streetlamps to access it more easily. *How could they possibly pass the trial of Taishan Mansion if they couldn’t even get to the trial without stairs and streetlamps?*

Stupid, for sure, but it made Xiao’s travel easier.

He closed his eyes as he approached the lip of Jueyan Karst. The sound of the waterfall and quiet cricket chirps was familiar and refreshing, and the dawn sunlight was soft through the misty air. Xiao breathed in deeply, feeling his energy replenish a little. For a moment, he could imagine that things were good and he was happy, as if it was his first time seeing Jueyan Karst in his life, as if he could sit on the cliff and swing his legs and smile as careful hands brushed his hair...

Xiao’s eyes flew open and he frowned. These kinds of thoughts and memories had no place in the present. He shook his head, glaring into the basin of the karst...

Then he blinked. He moved closer to the edge of the cliff, squinting.

A tiny purple figure was climbing up the side of the karst, moving awkwardly and abruptly, scuttling up the stone face like an insect.

Xiao furrowed his eyebrows. Why was a child out here at the crack of dawn after the biggest festivities of the year? And why was it scaling a cliff in adepts territory? He extended his senses out, feeling for the child’s energy.

Oh.

He dug his knuckles into the pressure points of his eye sockets and sighed, resisting the sharp reminder of his karmic debt circling and cutting into his skin. Of course. Of course he would come across the zombie after the longest battle of the year.

He turned back towards the path. *It’s fine, just leave it alone, it doesn’t know you and it doesn’t know you’re here, you owe it nothing, pretend you never saw it, just keep walking, you’re so tired and it’ll feel so wonderful to be back at the inn —*

The zombie fell off the cliff, landed directly on its back on the ground, and stopped moving.

Oh my gods.

Every rational thought left his mind and Xiao gasped instinctively, spreading his glider and flying across the karst in a manner of seconds, touching down quickly just a few feet shy of the stirring zombie. “Are you alright?”

The zombie sat up slowly, blinking magenta eyes and reaching up to pat her own head. “My hat..?”

Xiao bent over to scoop up the purple beret on the grass and adjusted the Cryo Vision on the side before offering it to the zombie. “Here.”

“Oh, my hat.” The zombie’s cold fingers brushed his palm.

He rubbed his hands together. “You’re not hurt? Are you okay?”

The zombie looked right past him, walking resolutely toward the cliff again and jumping up to start her climb upwards.

“Hey. *Hey!*” Xiao grasped one of the streamers hanging off the back of the zombie’s dress. “You just fell from there! What are you doing?”

The zombie’s black fingernails scratched against the stone as she tried to climb higher despite Xiao’s hold. “Let go.”

Xiao sighed in frustration, releasing the streamer. “You’re going to fall again.”

“Hup,” the zombie grunted softly, propelling herself up and out of Xiao’s reach on the cliff.

He turned away and pinched the bridge of his nose. *You didn’t ever want to see her anyway. You can just leave. It’s fine. Just let her do whatever she’s doing, just go...*

The zombie fell again. Xiao spun around just a moment too late to catch her and winced when the back of her head smacked sharply against a rock in the ground with a *crack*. If she’d been anything less than a zombie allogene, she would have shattered her bones.

“Ow.” She sat up again, dazed, but a moment later she was scaling the cliff again.

“*Stop!*” Xiao reached out for her but held his hand back at the last second. “You’re going to destroy yourself! What are you doing?”

Her hand slipped off the stone, and she skidded a few feet down, hissing as her nails screeched against the cliff. It must have been unbearably painful.

Surely she’s going to stop now.

Xiao sighed in frustration when the zombie started climbing up again, like a roach, like a mindless animal, like climbing the cliff was the only thing that mattered, like she was incapable of stopping —

Oh.

Xiao leaped forward, catching the zombie by the shoulders.

“*Let go!*” She shouted, wrenching out of his grasp.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry for this,” Xiao murmured before kneeling down, seizing the zombie, and wrapping his arms around her from behind, shuddering and trying hard not to mentally spiral from the first physical contact he’d intentionally made in centuries.

The zombie’s tiny body was cold in his arms, and her little legs kicked out frantically. “Let me go!”

“I will, I will, I promise, but help me help you!” Xiao forced the words through his teeth. Desperation clawed at his throat. “What am I missing here? Why are you so intent on climbing this

cliff?”

“*I have orders!*” the zombie said, still straining uselessly against his hold. “Dr. Baizhu said, ‘go to Jueyan Karst, climb the sheer rock faces, and pick herbs.’ I have to follow orders. I have to complete the orders. Body won’t stop moving. I *can’t* stop moving until I finish them, now let *go!*”

Xiao froze, even as the zombie dug her heels against the ground and tried to topple him backwards.

She couldn’t stop.

She couldn’t stop.

Zombies had to follow orders to the letter. She could climb this cliff and fall over and over again until her body dashed to pieces on the rocks below, and she still wouldn’t be able to stop.

He gritted his teeth until his ears rang.

He knew what that was like. No one knew better than he did how horrible it was to be out of control, to be moving your body against your will with no end to it in sight no matter what you did, putting yourself through pain that you physically couldn’t stop no matter how much your bones ached or your nails bled or your body burned from the inside out...

And I almost just left her here.

Xiao inhaled slowly and steadied himself against the zombie’s best efforts to knock him over, trying to ignore the waves of guilt washing over him. “How do I stop it? Do you know?”

She didn’t hear him. The zombie freed one of her little arms and grabbed Xiao’s wrist, trying to shove him away from her. “Let go! *Let go!* I have to follow orders!”

Despair and guilt twisted into a tight knot in Xiao’s chest, and his teeth crushed his lip. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt like this. How did he ever survive this? What was he supposed to do? *Why was he so hopeless right now?* He pictured the top of the cliff, trying to teleport them both there, and hissed when he almost blacked out. His hold on the zombie nearly slipped.

Tiny black fingernails sank painfully cold into Xiao’s skin, and he couldn’t help but feel like he deserved it.

All of this is my fault. She died because of me. She became a zombie because of me. She lost her memories because of me.

And I can’t even help her now.

Xiao’s heart stung, and he could taste blood. The hopelessness of the situation was too much. He couldn’t breathe. He couldn’t let her go. He couldn’t teleport. He couldn’t escape this. *He couldn’t.*

He hugged the zombie, holding her a little tighter to him, letting her furiously scratch his arm and kick at his knees with her flailing heels. *I deserve this. I deserve this.*

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry for everything, for all of this. If I could take it all back I would. If I could fix it somehow I would. I’m sorry.”

Sorry isn’t good enough.

Sorry wasn’t even a good enough word to express how he felt, to show her how he remembered every moment of that day five hundred years ago, to somehow give her memory and her ambition

back to her... “I wish things were different. I wish I could make it better. *I’m sorry.*”

The small hand stilled on his arm. “Huh.”

Xiao lifted his head when the zombie relaxed against him. “What..?”

“Hm.” The zombie wriggled. Xiao let her go, and she clambered over him. “Are you hurt?” She asked him in a slow voice, standing in front of him and looking down at the still-healing wounds on his skin. At her full height, she just reached Xiao’s eye level from where he knelt on the grass. “I can fix it.”

She tapped the paper ofuda talisman on her sleeve and summoned what looked weirdly like a snowball with a smiling face, which immediately started circling Xiao in a frosty orbit. He could feel the small burns and cuts from his nights of battle healing. Even the scratches on his arm where the zombie had grabbed him smoothed over.

He had never met a Cryo healer before. Cryo healing was different from the refreshing, gradual, cathartic healing that came from Hydro users; being healed by this snowball was sterile and clean, manifesting in sharp bursts of cold wind that stimulated his mind and cleared away the fog of battle that had gathered over the last days, leaching away pain that he didn’t even know he had.

“Thank you,” he said softly. “Are you not... Are you not going to try climbing up there anymore?”

The zombie tilted her head at him, and she seemed to be satisfied with her healing. Her magenta eyes were wide and genuine. “Did you ask me something? I forgot.”

Xiao exhaled a sigh of relief. *This is good.* “It’s nothing.”

“Okay, good.” She smiled. “Hi. I am Qiqi. I am a zombie. And...” She wrinkled her forehead under her hat. “I forget what comes next.”

“That’s okay. Hi, Qiqi.” He would not smile back. *He would not.* “I’m Xiao. I don’t suppose you could tell me what exactly I did to cancel your orders..?”

Qiqi slowly stretched her hand out and touched the long strand of hair on the side of Xiao’s face. “I like your hair.”

Her hand was cold enough that he could feel the chill of her skin, even centimeters away, but he didn’t flinch away. “Thank you.”

“I like your hair,” she said again. “It looks like a finch. I like finches.”

A finch.

Your mother used to call you Little Finch, he wanted to say. *That was a long, long time ago, but I remember. I remember.*

Another rush of guilt made Xiao’s skin crawl, and he drew his lips together, burying the urge to apologize again. “I like finches too.” *Do what you have to do, say what you have to say. Just get through this.* “So, Qiqi, what do you need? What herbs were you looking for?”

His hair slid out of her hand, and she scratched her cheek as she thought. “Violetgrass.”

Xiao shook his head. “There’s actually not a lot of violetgrass around here. They grow further South, by Lisha. Do you need anything else?”

“Uhhh... I forgot.” Qiqi scratched her head. She reached into a kangaroo pocket in the front of her dress and pulled out a small white notebook that she immediately began flipping through.

He took the opportunity to glance down at the book. Her handwriting was elegant and old-fashioned, appropriate for a child that lived five hundred years ago. Xiao caught a few glimpses as Qiqi turned the pages; he could see lists of *Calisthenic Exercises for Avoiding Rigor Mortis*; *Herbs of Bubu Pharmacy*; and *Numbers* in Liyuen characters from one to eight. “I like your notebook,” he told her.

“Someone gave it to me,” Qiqi replied. She looked up, her eyebrows furrowing into almost a single line, frowning in her attempt to remember something. “She had blue hair and horns... I can’t remember her name...”

Ah. “Ganyu?”

“Umm, maybe.”

Xiao exhaled shortly through his nose. Of course Ganyu would give this little zombie the perfect gift for her circumstance. “It’s a nice notebook.”

“Yeah. Sometimes I forget to check it, though.” Qiqi found the page she was looking for and trailed her finger down a list. “I need Qingxin flowers. Can you show me where to get some?”

Ha. The ghost of a smile crept across Xiao’s face, just a little. “Yes. Yes, I do.”

He’d been tired. He’d just wanted to go back to the inn and rest. He’d fought off more demons in fifteen days than he would for the remainder of the new year, and now instead of resting he was going to find Qingxin flowers with the zombie child that he’d had no desire to meet. There was a twinge in the back of his mind telling him *you’re getting too close you’re too close you’re too closetooclosetooclose*, and part of Xiao knew already that none of this was going to last.

But the absolute joy on Qiqi’s baby face made him feel like it was almost worth it.

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Xiao teleported them to the Statue of Morax just West of the Karst. Qiqi’s healing had helped replenish his energy, but he wanted to make sure he wouldn’t just black out halfway through and drop her somewhere in space. The plateau wasn’t as high as Qingyun Peak, but it was high enough that the translucent white Qingxin could grow on it, and Xiao could always rely on this plateau to yield a good number of flowers.

He let go of Qiqi’s hand as soon as he was sure that they were safely on the ground, taking a moment to catch his breath while Qiqi toddled over to the cliffside. “Careful,” he warned.

“I have not been this high up since... I can’t remember.” Qiqi peeked down from over the edge of the peak. “It’s nice and cold.”

The wind was definitely chilly as it whipped Xiao’s hair against his face. He pushed his teal bangs back from his forehead and hummed an affirmation, sitting down at the base of the Statue and leaning back. “There’s Qingxin here, if you want it.”

“Oh, yeah.” Qiqi looked around with a little hop and made a soft “ooh” sound of cheer before kneeling down to pick the flowers. She was very careful about it, fingers delicate against the stem of the flower and severing them with the utmost care, not damaging any roots or crushing the fleshy stem more than she had to. The thin petals of the flowers were very full for early spring

plants, and Qiqi chirped in happiness when she picked one that was particularly fluffy. She tugged on Xiao's sleeve. "Hey, look!"

It wasn't endearing. "Very nice." He closed his eyes and rested his head against the Statue's sun-warmed bronze pedestal. The zombie could take care of herself.

He sighed when he felt a tug on his sleeve again just a few moments later. "Hey," Qiqi said. "There's no more."

"Mm." Xiao tilted his head to the side, stretching the muscles in his neck and shoulder. "All gone. Time to go home?"

"No," Qiqi said insistently, consulting her little notebook. "I need two more. Will you help me?"

Too close too close too close. He sighed again, pulling himself up. "Okay. Just two more, right?"

"Yes." She nodded, bouncing a little on the balls of her feet.

"Alright..." Xiao flexed his fingers. He was still feeling a little fatigued. "There are more around the cliff over there. Do you know how to glide?"

"Yes," Qiqi repeated, spreading a snow-white and blue glider across her shoulders.

"Okay, follow me." Xiao jumped off the side of the cliff and opened his glider, flying across the peaks towards the hill in question. He heard the *fwhip* sound of Qiqi's glider behind him.

Qiqi was a breath of fresh air. She didn't treat Xiao with pity like he was a victim, and she didn't look at him with fear as if she thought he would attack her any moment. She just kind of existed and exuded calm, positive energy. It was nice.

In the depths of Xiao's heart, though, he knew that if she was capable of knowing and remembering who he really was, she would be terrified. The image of her dying, the sounds of her crying, the look in her magenta eyes as her body reanimated — it was all so vivid in Xiao's memories.

Archons. Xiao shook his head, pressing his lips firmly together. *Just get through this day.*

He closed his glider and dropped lightly to the ground in front of a peak, hearing Qiqi drop down behind him with a small *oof*. They hadn't started from a high enough point that they could fly directly to the top of the hill. "There's more Qingxin up there," he said. "On top of the hill."

Qiqi looked up, then down at her hands, then back up to the top of the hill before turning slowly to look at Xiao and putting her arms up. "Will you help me?"

Hah?

Xiao's mind went blank and he stared down at her.

A few awkward quiet moments passed by.

He must have been making some kind of brainless expression because Qiqi's eyebrows furrowed deep in concern. "What's going on?"

"Nothing." Xiao coughed. "Here, hold on." He lifted Qiqi up and shifted her onto his back as quickly and with as minimal contact as possible. He exhaled slowly when she wrapped her cold little arms around his shoulders, and they began the climb to the peak.

Xiao was a good climber. He had more stamina than most when it came to scaling cliffs and walls like this, but it was his first time doing so with a zombie on his back. “Do you... always have to do this alone?” He asked her between huffs of effort.

“I am the herb gatherer,” she said simply. “I pick herbs for Dr. Baizhu and sometimes I prepare medications.”

She forgot the question. He paused for a moment, clinging to the rock with one hand and rotating his other wrist. “Alone?”

“Yeah.” A tinge of pride ran through Qiqi’s voice, and Xiao could hear her smile. “I am in better shape than Dr. Baizhu. So I run around and pick herbs. And sometimes I prepare medications.”

“Mmf.” Xiao grunted softly and pulled them up over the face of the peak, dropping into a sitting position and allowing Qiqi to hop off of his back. She immediately darted for the Qingxin that she saw, overshooting her sprint a little bit and wobbling her arms to steady herself where she stood. Xiao swallowed down a chuckle of disbelief, turning it into a cough instead. “Do you like Dr. Baizhu?”

“Hm...” Qiqi’s face pinched into a forced blankness, but some frustration churned behind her eyes as she fought to remember how she felt. “He worries about me and helps me. He does not love me. I think he has his own reason for helping me.” She looked down at the Qingxin in her hand, and her eyes were hidden behind her beret. “I can’t remember his face. But I appreciate him.” She put the Qingxin into her pocket with the others.

Not being able to remember things had to come with its own issues. Qiqi must have been confused and frustrated for the majority of the time, reaching for memories that she didn’t have and fighting to recall the emotions that mattered.

But it was easier for Qiqi to forget. Sometimes Xiao wished he could forget. If he could have just forgotten or never known what it felt like to be happy, it would be easier to survive now. Maybe she couldn’t remember her life before or the events that hurt her, but it was an unspoken blessing that she didn’t have to go through the pain that came with that kind of knowledge.

It’s okay, Xiao thought. I will remember.

“What else do you remember?” He asked her, hoping for an agreeable answer.

“Two people.”

He blinked. “Only two?”

Zombies weren’t very expressive, but somehow Qiqi managed to scowl. “I remember Dr. Baizhu, and I remember Hu Tao. I can’t remember his face. But I have to remember *her* face.” She scowled impossibly deeper, and for a moment Xiao was afraid the stiff rigor-mortis-muscles in her face were going to bend. “Punchable. Punchable face.”

Xiao bit his lip, trying not to laugh, and a *kmf* sound escaped him. “Tell me who that is.”

Qiqi folded her arms and drew herself up to her full height. Xiao looked up at her from where he sat on the ground, and the indignation in the set of her mouth made her seem almost like a formidable opponent.

“She keeps trying to bury me. She says I’ll be free if she does. I hate it. I run away.” Qiqi tossed her head, and the smallest bit of attitude showed in the motion.

Xiao nodded, not at all amused, not at all, *not even a little bit, definitely not*. “You might be forgetful, but you’re not slow.”

Qiqi smiled at him. He smiled back, and the expression reached his eyes.

It felt strange. It felt nice. It was the first time in a long, long time that something had made him smile.

Stop.

He immediately dropped his eyes to his hands, rubbing at the scars beneath his gauntlet. *She’s going to forget this within the next hour. You have no connection with her.*

It’s better for her this way.

He looked away.

Right at that moment, a particularly strong gust of wind blustered around the peak, pulling at the streamers on Xiao’s clothing and pushing Qiqi over, *dangerously close to the edge of the cliff* —

“Careful!”

Purely out of instinct, Xiao leaped to his feet and caught Qiqi by her torso, scooping her up in his arms and bracing his body away from the wind, hardly noticing the contact, mind solely focused on making sure she didn’t fall. Her eyelashes rapidly blinked against his cheekbone, but he barely felt it.

The breeze died down and Xiao pulled his face away from her. “Are you okay?”

Qiqi’s eyes were huge and dark. “Woaaaaaaah,” she marveled softly. “Qiqi almost got blown away.”

“Yes, you did.” Xiao’s heart was slamming against his chest. He could feel his pulse hammering in his temples, in his wrists, in his neck, each drumming a pattern that chanted, *you almost let her get hurt again, almost let her get hurt again, let her get hurt again*. “That’s enough Qingxin for today. Time to go home.”

“No, I have to pick Qingxin,” Qiqi said, almost like she was surprised.

“You *have* Qingxin,” Xiao told her patiently. “Check your pocket.”

She did. “Oh.”

How often did she do this? How often did she forget that she’d done her work already and go through the extra effort, the extra time, the extra danger it took to find more herbs? He could probably teleport her to Liyue Harbor and leave her at the pharmacy. It was still early in the day, so she was unlikely to come across Hu Tao or anyone that might try to take advantage of her. She was an allogene, sure, but she was also *seven*. He could bring her back, and her work would be done, and she wouldn’t hurt herself or be too close or —

Qiqi suddenly put her cold hands on Xiao’s cheeks, and he flinched.

Somehow he’d forgotten that he was still holding her.

Too close, too close, too close too close tooclosetooclosetooclose

“Tell me your name again?” She asked, eyes wide and earnest.

He pulled away from her touch, but he didn’t put her down. “Xiao. My name is Xiao.”

“I don’t want to forget you,” Qiqi said, all the intensity of a covenant in her voice. “I’ll write your name down. I’m going to remember you.”

Xiao felt his face soften. “Alright.” *I know you won’t.*

“I’m *going to*,” she said a little more insistently. “I’m stronger than I look. I’ll remember you.”

“I believe you,” he said, as reassuring as he could, but he didn’t meet her eyes.

No, I don’t.

I can’t.

Forget me. Please.

That was all he could think as he closed his eyes and willed them into Liyue Harbor.

◇ ◇ ◇

The night of demon slaying was laughably easy compared to the hell of the weeks before, and Xiao found enough energy and good mood in him the next morning to accompany Rex Lapis on a walk towards the city. The morning was grey and misty and pleasantly cool; when Xiao breathed in, he could feel the air condense on his tongue, sweet and refreshing.

They walked in comfortable silence, peaceful and calm, until Rex Lapis stopped abruptly.

Xiao looked up. “My Lord?”

Rex Lapis inclined his head off the path, towards the cliffs overlooking Liyue Harbor. “Is that the zombie you spent the morning with a few days back?”

Xiao turned to see Qiqi’s small purple form climbing a short height up the stone off the path, reaching for a violetgrass just over her head. *More like the zombie that I killed.* “Yes, that’s her.”

Before Xiao could stop him, Rex Lapis raised his arm to greet the zombie. “Good morning, Qiqi,” he called.

Qiqi turned blankly, plucking the violetgrass and dropping to the ground. She squinted at them, and Xiao could see the gears of her brain churning to match her memories. “Sorry, who are you?”

“I am Morax, but people call me Rex Lapis.” The archon smiled at Qiqi as she walked closer. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Here it comes.

“And who are you?” Qiqi asked Xiao.

He blinked.

He felt nothing.

He didn’t feel sad. He didn’t feel regretful. He had known this was coming.

"I'm Xiao," he answered without inflection.

Qiqi cocked her head. "I like your hair. It looks like a finch. I like finches."

"I know." He kept walking, not waiting for Rex Lapis. "Have a good day, Qiqi."

She looked a little puzzled, but she waved. "Good-bye."

Rex Lapis frowned, looking over his shoulder as he followed. "Xiao, are you alright?"

"Yes," Xiao answered easily. "Why do you ask?"

Amber eyes watched him thoughtfully. "That whole exchange seemed like something that would hurt you," he said, each word calculated.

"No." Xiao looked forward, face neutral. "It's better this way."

Rex Lapis's brows knit in concern. "At your core, you're still a gentle person, Xiao. You..." He cleared his throat. "You care, a lot."

Xiao shook his head. "It's better this way," he repeated. "I've realized something, my Lord. My anxiety gets me nowhere. I don't worry about things. I don't think about things. I don't have to care about anything anymore, except for you, and my contract. All I am is a weapon, and I just need to focus on that."

Rex Lapis's eyes blew wide, and he stopped short. "What? You don't believe that, Xiao."

"I do believe that." Xiao kept walking like nothing was wrong. "Since I came back almost a thousand years ago, everyone in my life except you has gone or died or left me. I am a weapon. I don't need anything else."

"Where are these words coming from?" Rex Lapis reached out for him, but he knew better than to touch him. "You deserve love, Xiao—"

"Do I?" Xiao whirled around, and whatever concern or regret he might have felt for interrupting the archon died before it reached his heart. "The karma says otherwise, my Lord. Loudly."

"You of all people know you can't listen to the karma." Rex Lapis's face flashed.

"Let's be honest, the voices are right most of the time. I'll do my duty for you and say whatever I need to say, but I don't care anymore." He gritted his teeth. "It doesn't hurt because I *can't* be with the people I loved anymore. It hurts that *I don't care*. It hurts that where there used to be a lot of love, there's nothing left. Sometimes I wish I was like Qiqi. I wish I didn't have to remember all of it. Because I'd rather *have* nothing than *feel* nothing."

I think I'm finally broken.

"I had a pleasant morning with Qiqi yesterday, and she completely forgot me, and now everything is back to normal and I'm not missing anything," Xiao continued. "I have you, my Lord, and I know *you* love me, and that's enough for me in this life."

Rex Lapis was quiet.

Xiao could smell and hear the life of the city from here. The salt of the sea hung in the air, and early morning fishmongers hawked their competing prices across the docks. As the sun rose a little higher, people roused themselves as well, and the feeling of their aspirations washed over him.

They were so innocent. So ignorant.

How lucky.

Rex Lapis folded his arms over his chest. “You’re good to Qiqi, Xiao,” he said, turning to look the yaksha directly in the eye. “You were good to the little ghost at the Wangshu Inn. And you are good to me. There’s gentleness still in you, and I hope you hold onto it. Whether or not you believe it, and whether or not you care, you are worthy of being loved.”

There was an air of finality to the words, and Xiao frowned, suddenly uneasy. “Thank you.”

It kind of seemed like Rex Lapis was giving up on talking to him, but Xiao couldn’t find it in him to even feel upset about it. It wasn’t as though the archon would say anything Xiao hadn’t already heard, and Xiao wasn’t sure he could make him feel anything anyway.

That hurt more than everything.

He dug his nails into his forearm, almost hard enough to break the skin, and exhaled in relief at the familiar sting.

“Do you want to know something interesting?” Rex Lapis asked gently.

Yes. Please. Xiao nodded.

“It’s interesting that it’s been a year since Qiqi woke up, because it’s been a year now since the Archon of Inazuma closed the country borders.” He exhaled and closed his eyes.

Confusion distracted Xiao, at least for a second. “Why? What does that mean for Teyvat?”

“I don’t know exactly. I haven’t really been able to communicate with the other Archons except for Barbatos, and he’s only just reawakened. I did talk to the Tsaritsa from Snezhnaya, and she told me that Teyvat is going to go through changes, probably the biggest changes it’s ever experienced since the destruction of Khaenri’ah. There’s a Traveler in Mondstadt, an Outlander, already turning the nation upside down, and it cannot be a coincidence that this is all happening now.” He pressed his lips together, folding his arms a little more securely. “Big things are about to happen, Xiao.”

The uneasy feeling spread like ice through Xiao’s veins. He noticed all at once the tired lines around Rex Lapis’s eyes and the sunken quality of his skin, and suspicion clouded his vision. “Are you saying that because you are tired, or because you know something is coming?”

Rex Lapis didn’t seem to hear him. “I became an Archon thousands and thousands of years ago, and it wasn’t ever something I thought that I could do,” he murmured, like his mind was far, far away. “I fell in love. I founded two cities. I defeated Osial. I rescued you.” He turned to look at Xiao, but his amber eyes were distant. “All of these things were some of the best things that ever could have happened to me. I could not have predicted or expected any of them, but my life is the way it is because of them. Sometimes the memory of what I have lost makes me sad. But I am always grateful that I have those memories to hold onto. The things I remember matter. The things you remember matter. Regardless of whether or not you *like* remembering them, they matter.”

Xiao’s gaze was hard and flaming gold. “So are you tired, or do you know something is coming?”

“I am tired,” Rex Lapis replied, and Xiao breathed out a tiny exhale he didn’t know he’d been holding. “I don’t think I’ve ever been more tired in my life, truly, like I have lived for too long. Have I done everything I can do? Will it never get any different from this?”

He sounds like Bosacius.

“My Lord, do you sleep?” Xiao asked, swallowing the burr of anxiety rising in his throat. “If you don’t, it might do you some good to rest. You sound... Burned out.”

Breathe. This is fine. He’s Rex Lapis. He’s fine.

“I’m fine!” Rex Lapis smiled at him, but Xiao wasn’t fully convinced. “I have a plan.”

Xiao bit his scabbed-over lip, wincing when the taste of blood hit his tongue. “Are you still going to go into the city? If you want to go somewhere and rest, I’ll stay with you, my Lord. I can stay with you before the sun sets.” *Don’t go away*, he prayed silently. *Don’t go anywhere, don’t go, you’re scaring me. Please don’t go away.*

“Thank you for the offer, but the Rite of Descension is tomorrow, and I should prepare for that. But I will see you soon, Xiao, I promise.” The smile didn’t waver from the archon’s face.

Xiao clenched his fists. “Remember, you promised you wouldn’t leave me. Please, be safe.”

“Xiao.” Rex Lapis put a gentle hand on his shoulder, and Xiao looked up to face him. “I am the Archon of Contracts. Have I ever broken a promise?”

“No, my Lord,” Xiao said under his breath. *He’s never, ever broken a promise. He’s Rex Lapis. This is fine. Just breathe.*

Why is it so hard to breathe?

Rex Lapis smiled again comfortingly before turning to continue his walk down to the city. “You be safe as well, Xiao. Remember that I care about you.”

He couldn't possibly forget such a thing.

Xiao wrapped his arms around himself, determined not to show his archon any more weakness. “Thank you.” He watched Rex Lapis’s back until he disappeared into the city.

The night was insufferably long. There weren’t too many demons, but for whatever reason the ever-irrelevant time just crawled and the sun refused to rise. Xiao just could not shake the pressure on his chest, the ice in his blood, the karma burning his skin, and the constant thought that *something was irreparably wrong*.

Maybe he shouldn’t have been surprised when just an hour after the sun rose, he watched from that very spot as the magnificent dragon form of Rex Lapis fell out of the sky and landed lifeless in the middle of the city.

Chapter End Notes

Read more about:

[Qiqi's Story](#)

[Dongsheng, Adventurer-Turned-Grocer and Tax-Evading King](#)

气: energy (chi)

七: seven (qi)

End Note:

Merry Christmas to those who celebrate, and thank you again for reading <3

I'm actually losing my mind trying to deliver you guys (and myself) the best possible ending here, and I'm sorry to tell you now that that means I need to take some time off to research a little bit. I'll be back :) Like I keep saying, this is the most important project in my life, and of course I will finish it!

That being said, my entire family has tested positive for Covid-19 except me, so I'll be a while. I promise not to die before you all get to meet Lumine.

Seriously, I love you all in the best way that I can, and thank you again for everything <3 I WISH YOU ALL A C6 XIAO ON YOUR FIRST TEN PULLS, AND HAPPY SHENHE AND ALL THAT.

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Cold Dark, Warm Light

Chapter Summary

“One does not see any reason why the adepti should not just destroy the city itself!”

“That is an impractical solution, and does not bring justice!” Moon Carver declared.

“One is not concerned about justice in this instance! You must realize that if any one person in the city is capable of destroying our Lord, they are equivalently capable of destroying us!” Mountain Shaper’s beak opened wider than his body, expressing as much displeasure as a crane possibly could.

Xiao took a shallow breath, holding it for a few seconds before exhaling. “I didn’t ask you all here to debate the destruction of Liyue,” he said as calmly as he could manage. “The Traveler only notified me about the Qixing not trusting us in the slightest, regardless of all that we’ve done for Liyue, though it appears that we do not trust them either.” Obviously. “Will we work with the humans and the Qixing to move Liyue forward?”

Chapter Notes

tw; self-harm, derealization, some symptoms of bipolar behavior (as it appears for me)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Tianquan had lit up the Geo shrine as usual. The shrine had shot up a beam of light as usual. The clouds had gathered in a swirl as usual. Then the usual cheers of the usual crowds turned into screams as Rex Lapis’s body, unnaturally devoid of any Geo energy, cracked the stone square of the city with an indescribable crash.

Screaming prayers immediately flooded Xiao’s mind, mass panic from the gathered people and requests to the adepti for help and all kinds of overwhelming fear and denial and mourning and anger and chaos, searing human thoughts into his mind: *“I didn’t do it, the smoke, it’s insane, I can’t believe this, I don’t know anything, please have mercy! Arrest them! Who would harm Rex Lapis? I can’t believe it, what exactly happened, in broad daylight, what kind of dark magic is this, Rex Lapis how how how how HOW HOW HOW”*

Every nerve in his body was alive and tingling and burning with cold and he could feel every dust particle against his skin and hear every blade of grass on the mountain and see every pore on every face all the way down in the city, all of it in a crushingly hyperaware sensory overload that tugged on the edges of his sanity. His unblinking eyes started to dry.

All at once he turned sharply and started running, sprinting and stumbling until he hit a wall, climbing until there was nowhere else to go, swimming until he hit the land and running again. At every part of the land that he recognized, he turned and ran faster away from the familiarity, racing to wherever he did not have to be reminded of *anything*. As long as he was moving he didn’t have

to think. So he didn't stop.

At some point he lost feeling in his legs.

He wanted to lose feeling entirely.

Time passed. He didn't stop.

He fell off the side of a cliff and allowed himself to tumble down the rock, rising to keep running despite the shooting pain in his bones.

He ran into a cluster of Pyro slimes that he ordinarily would have avoided out of fear of getting burned and cut them down in two dash attacks, ignoring the sparks that alighted on his skin as the slimes exploded.

He swam through Mist-flower chilled water, relishing in the numbing freeze that constricted his flesh against his skeleton and took away all other sensations.

He had just enough sense left to stop before he threw himself into the Chasm.

There was a tiny crevice in the mountain range that bordered Liyue, connected to the land by water. He swam into it and shoved himself as far back into the corner against the rock as he could, his clothes dripping and freezing, teeth chattering as he shivered more from dread than from cold.

He'd hated the dark since he'd been freed from the blackstone domain that still haunted him, but now he closed his eyes, blocking out everything, trembling as the fright he'd been running from this whole time crashed into him in wave after wave after wave after wave after wave after wave after wave.

Rex Lapis.

"Please don't actually be gone," he prayed urgently through frozen lips in a whisper that was barely coherent to his own ears. "Don't be gone, Rex Lapis, please, I'll do anything. I'll sign a million contracts, I'll fight every battle, I'll exorcize every demon there is, I'll tear down the mountains and rebuild Liyue myself, just please don't be gone, please, don't leave me, Rex Lapis, *you promised...*"

He hugged his knees to his chest, water running in icy rivulets down his legs and his neck and pooling around him; for the first time since he started running he became distinctly aware of the deep pressure in his chest of his heart forcefully trying to break out of his rib cage. His breath came in short pants that fogged in the cold air, grating his throat and drying out the passages of his face.

None of that mattered. None of it.

He slammed his head sharply against the stone behind him, relishing in the blunt pain that followed, again and again and again and again and again until the skin on his scalp broke and hot blood dripped down his numb back.

"What did I do?" He whispered. "Please tell me what I did. Please come back. Make me tea and tell me you're not gone, it's not true, and *you keep your fucking contracts —*"

Xiao coughed, dry and painful in his chest, wheezing pathetically with every following exhale.

"I hate you," he hissed. I hate you. I hate you, Rex Lapis, *no, I don't*, just come back and don't be gone!"

He lowered his head onto his knees. Drops of blood rolled down the side of his head into his dry eyes. *Was I too much for him? Was the burden of my existence too much for him?*

“I’ll eat everything you put in front of me,” he vowed. “I’ll read the things you write, I’ll take my medicine regularly, I’ll help the humans, I’ll move to the city with you, I’ll *sleep*, I promise I’ll sleep, just come back... Please...”

Any minute now. Any minute now Rex Lapis would come and sit next to him and put a hand on his shoulder and be present with him and give him tea and tell him that it was all a misunderstanding, that he was fine and he kept his contracts and he promised him he wouldn’t go away again. Any minute now.

Any minute now.

Any minute now.

“What’s the point of surviving now?” He prayed in a near-silent voice, wishing for every archon, any archon, to answer him.

A million times before Xiao had thought that there was nothing left of him to break, only to break even more.

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Days later, Xiao’s skin had not quite gone back up to its normal temperature. He felt hollow and empty, like all of his life essence had left him. Breathing and thinking were just turning gears in the necessity of keeping the shell of his body alive. Nothing could surprise him anymore. There was nothing left of him, nothing left to lose, nothing to make him feel anything. Demons must have

been running amok all throughout the time that he'd been gone, but he almost didn't care — there was no reason now to continue holding to his contract.

In a stark contrast to the vast over-sensory input of the last few days, his eyes, nose, and ears all felt rubbery and useless. His tears froze over the surface of his eyes. He couldn't breathe through his nose. The sun was searingly bright but he didn't squint.

He returned to Wangshu Inn, more for the routine of it all than anything else, numb from cold and devoid of emotion.

The Outlander Traveler and a small pink fairy were on his balcony.

Xiao clenched his jaw, his heart too overwhelmed and drained to even be angry. Weariness fell across him like the weight of the world on his shoulders.

Paimon doesn't get it, the fairy said in a high voice, and Xiao winced as the pitch resounded in his ears, Jueyan Karst is so mystical, and this place is so basic. Are we really going to find an adeptus here? It looks so normal...

Maybe that's the point, Paimon, the Traveler answered. No one would think to look for an adeptus here. He could be hiding in plain sight, anywhere up here.

Xiao was immediately exhausted that the one safe place he was supposed to have had again been infiltrated by stupid, worshipping humans looking to have a wish answered. Silent dust seemed to congeal the sound of their voices, falling bluntly in his comprehension. *To the blind, everything may not be as it appears.*

Oh! The Traveler jumped when she saw him, taking a respectful step backwards. *Hi there.*

You're the Traveler, he said flatly, voice cold and flat and raw.

Yes. My name is Lumine, and this is Paimon.

The words were so distant, and the air between them was so fragile.

Who told you where to find me?

Moon Carver, she answered quickly, holding out a gold Adeptal Sigil of Permission for him to see.

Xiao hadn't seen a Sigil of Permission in years. Some humans had apparently used them during the Archon War, but he never fought alongside humans enough to have experienced one.

His face ached from stiff lack of movement, and his eyes burned drily when he blinked. He might be so far dissociated that he couldn't think, but he knew enough what the sigil meant: humans that carried them were to be respected by the adepti.

Adeptal Sigils are based on the adeptus's compliance. Just because I won't hurt you doesn't mean it will protect you from being affected in other ways.

The fairy, Paimon, scrunched up her entire tiny face in a pout. *Hey! What's that supposed to mean?*

Interactions between humans and adepti do not end well. Humans cannot handle this level of energy. So for your own good, leave. Now. He turned away and put his hands on the rail, not bothering to see if they were actually obeying him. The fairy made little sounds of indignation, but Xiao barely comprehended them. Before long, their presence faded from his awareness as they

descended the stairs behind him.

Sunlight seeped into his skin, and he exhaled a tiny breath, trying to release at least some of the tension in his shoulders and stomach and temples, but the numb icy stiffness remained. The Liyue landscape, usually so beautiful and colorful and sweet, seemed dark and gray and unfriendly. His skin was lifelessly frozen, and a near-burning cold, churning energy seemed to be stuck in the cavity of his chest.

He closed his eyes and stilled at the rail. His fingers twitched.

Breathe, he thought, but even that was an effort; the air burned his lungs, and they ached with the brittle stretch of inhaling. Movement was painful. Thought was painful.

Existence was painful.

If he didn't move, it wasn't real. If no one spoke to him and he spoke to no one, he didn't even have to acknowledge that anything had happened, that the world was still turning even when it was falling apart.

If Xiao could be still, the world could be still.

Unfortunately, the Traveler and the loud fairy returned to the balcony just minutes later.

Xiao gritted his teeth and turned when he felt their energies approach him. *Again?*

Wait! The fairy shrieked, and Xiao grimaced as the noise rang in his ears. *Just a second, don't send us away! We brought you this!*

The fairy held out a plate of mixed potato, greens, and egg that made Xiao's stomach clench in revulsion — but the Traveler, quietly looking respectfully at the floor, offered a plate of almond tofu. *It's Lumine's specialty, Satisfying Salad, and your favorite! Almond Tofu!*

The sweet smell of almonds sent a shivering tremor through Xiao.

Don't take it, it's a distraction, they're just going to ask you for something in return, they don't care about you, there's no one left that cares about you, don't take it, *don't you dare fucking take it.*

The icy lump in Xiao's throat hardened.

But wouldn't it be nice?

When was the last time he ate?

When was the last time he ate a *dream*?

His vision tunneled. The dish was in his hands before he knew it, cold and sweet and silky smooth

and wonderful in every way, refreshing the ketones of his breath, easing the cramping sensation in his stomach, a gentle reminder of all the good things Rex Lapis had done for him —

Shit.

The inside of Xiao's cheek burst between his teeth, overwhelming the sweet and cool osmanthus syrup with the burning copper taste of blood, and he came back to crushing reality, panic flooding his senses and drawing the sights and sounds around him into painful clarity. The Traveler was talking, and Xiao was pathetically aware of every word, trying hard not to spit or gasp out loud, turning to put the plate down.

“... I don't know Moon Carver's relationship with Rex Lapis, but he seems more than a little upset with the way that the Qixing handled everything. He said he couldn't believe that they would think to blame me for anything. The Tianquan locked down the city, but...” She cleared her throat. “I got away.”

Xiao's soul was numb with cold, and he closed his eyes, as if that could make everything that the Traveler had said go away.

He swallowed and swallowed again, trying to get rid of the taste of blood. “Thank you for your report. I will talk to the other adepti,” he said, short. Curt. Barely holding his emotion back.

“What are you going to do?” The Traveler asked, and Xiao bit back his irritation that she wasn't just leaving. “Are you going to interrogate the Qixing? Will the adepti take over Rex Lapis's role in Liyue?”

“*Pft.*” Xiao scoffed aloud, the pure outlandishness of the Traveler's question momentarily outshining all of his spiraling thoughts. “As if we could possibly do for Liyue what Rex Lapis has done. You would not understand the ways of the adepti.”

“Rude,” the fairy muttered.

His senses wavered, and he forced himself to steady. “I don't interact with the human world. But responsibilities are responsibilities, and our god is the god of Contracts...” He sighed, shaking his head and turning out towards the balcony. “I'll be going, then.”

“Wait!” The fairy reached out for him.

Xiao jerked away before she could make contact, blood pressure immediately rocketing.

The fairy, Paimon, immediately withdrew a little. “Paimon just wanted to ask... Are you going to eat that?” She looked at the Traveler's salad hopefully.

The Traveler sighed and put her palm to her forehead.

Xiao narrowed his eyes. “No. I am not.”

“More for Paimon!” The fairy turned from where she floated in the air and descended like a hawk onto the dish, smacking her lips loudly.

“Sorry about her,” the Traveler muttered to Xiao, drawing up slowly to him, keeping herself in his line of vision. “She would eat dirt if you put it on a plate.”

“Mm.” He could feel the warmth of the Traveler's skin thawing his numb skin, and he took a step away from her.

“I did have a question, though,” the Traveler said quickly, thinking he was about to leave. “There was a little ghost, a spirit that freaked out the chef of the inn, and we had to make her promise not to mess with the guests of the inn anymore. Do you have something to do with her?”

It was a harmless question. He lifted one shoulder. “In demon slaying, not all spirits are bad. She has no intentions to hurt anyone, so Verr Goldet allows her presence here on my behalf.”

The Traveler smiled, and her expression was like the sun breaking through a rainstorm, sweet features lighting up her face and crinkling the corners of her eyes in satisfaction, undeniably beautiful. “That’s really nice.”

Xiao’s eye twitched. His tongue worried at the broken spot in his cheek. He crossed his arms; his skin was still freezing, even through his gloves. “Mhm. I’ll be going then.”

He pinched his nose bridge, willing himself to Mount Aocang, just slow enough that he could hear the Traveler say, “I hope you liked the almond tofu! Thank you for your time!”

He opened his eyes over the familiar peak of Mount Aocang, hissing in some mixed frustration he couldn’t fully name, already overwhelmed.

The Traveler wasn’t here to fix anything. She was probably human, and not even an allogene, and most certainly not on the same level that he was. Her smile was too good. Her dress was too white. She was too impractical, too shiny, too *whole* for him to be around. The whole interaction with her had been so far away and distant; nothing he’d said was good or helpful. Nothing could bring back what he’d lost. It didn’t matter. *It’s so cold.*

It wasn’t right to feel any kind of good when everything in Liyue was so irreversibly wrong.

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This sentiment only increased in value as the last few remaining active adepti argued. Xiao massaged his temples, holding back a sigh as Mountain Shaper’s deep, angry voice drowned out the angry flutters of Cloud Retainer’s feathers.

“One does not see any reason why the adepti should not just destroy the city itself!”

“That is an impractical solution, and does not bring justice!” Moon Carver declared.

“One is not concerned about *justice* in this instance! You must realize that if any one person in the city is capable of destroying our Lord, they are equivalently capable of destroying *us*!” Mountain Shaper’s beak opened wider than his body, expressing as much displeasure as a crane possibly could.

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“I like the Traveler!” Madame Ping, a human-appearing adeptus that looked older than the mountains, hummed. She was gently smiling, as if she wasn’t standing between two extremely ruffled crane adepti and a magic stag that was pounding the shape of its hoof into the dirt. “She is doing her best to figure out how to navigate the situation between the adepti and the Qixing as well.”

Cloud Retainer tossed her proud head. “Do you believe that she will join the side of the Qixing?”

Madame Ping shrugged her ancient shoulders. “Lumine asked me for a cleansing bell. She is trying to be as faithful as possible to the Funeral Rite of Parting, despite having never met our Lord. I cannot say.”

“I like her as well,” Ganyu added softly. “She is kind, and she does her best to hear the perspective of all parties.”

Ganyu had glanced at Xiao once when she arrived on the mountain with Madame Ping and smiled briefly.

Xiao hadn’t smiled back. He still didn’t feel anything but cold. The mountaintop wind blew chills across his skin, and he shivered.

Cloud Retainer frowned. “Is this Traveler the one who touched the Guizhong Ballista outside the city border?”

Mountain Shaper blinked aggressively. “Touching it in what way? Moving it? Operating it?”

“No. Whoever touched it actually repaired it perfectly, and it is fully operational again.”

Ganyu’s eyes widened in shock. “Who on earth besides *you* knows how to fix the Guizhong Ballista?”

Silence fell across the circle. Moon Carver’s hoof stilled on the ground.

Xiao closed his eyes.

Rex Lapis knows how to repair the Guizhong Ballista.

But they had all felt him die, and the damned Traveler had sought them out and confirmed the existence of the lifeless Exuvia.

Fuck. Xiao’s nails pressed crescents into his palms, hands too cold and stiff to even feel it.

Madame Ping cleared her throat gently. “The fact stands, my fellow adepts. What are we going to do about this?”

Mountain Shaper flapped his wings with tangible aggression, and Xiao watched him from the corner of his eye. “Obviously, the killer is among the humans in the city, and the Qixing are not doing enough if they have not found the culprit yet.”

“Indeed.” Cloud Retainer nodded, voice dripping with scorn. “Who do those humans think they are? Building up to create their own Celestia, as if the Jade Palace could ever compare to the technological feats of Guizhong and oneself.”

“*What are you saying?* We can’t just kill them!” Ganyu protested, spreading her arms out and taking a step forward, surprising the other adepts into silence. “We can’t just get rid of them. Each of you has signed a contract to protect this land, and this people! Liyue Harbor is everything that Rex Lapis worked for in the last thousands of years to build and protect!”

“He was betrayed by someone there, Ganyu,” Cloud Retainer said coldly.

“You don’t know who did that!” Ganyu cried, desperately looking around the circle for someone to support her. For a second, her sunset eyes met Xiao’s.

He avoided her gaze and looked at the ground, hyper-focused on the dirt and the grass there. *I don't want to be here. I don't want them to fight. I don't want this. Don't include me in this.*

Moon Carver finally spoke up, though he sounded less convinced than the two cranes. "There is not enough reason to so rashly wipe out the city. One will not stand behind this mission."

"At the very least, we should *talk* to the Qixing," Madame Ping offered softly, putting a comforting hand on Ganyu's arm. "There is more to the story than we must know. The humans, especially the Traveler, are working hard to have the perfect Funeral Rite, and they have displayed clear signs that they care."

Ganyu gave Madame Ping a grateful smile before turning back to Cloud Retainer. "Humans aren't all horrible! They just need a little more time."

Cloud Retainer was unmoving. "Ganyu, do you, as a half-qilin, actually care for the humans, or are you simply trying to stall us?"

Archons.

Xiao's eyes flashed to Ganyu, tension pulling the muscles in his jaw and karmic pain jolting the nerves in his arms. Ganyu already struggled with finding her place in the cultural center of human and adeptus; how could Cloud Retainer, the adepti that raised Ganyu, accuse her of this kind of betrayal??

For a moment, a twinge of hurt crossed Ganyu's face, but it was gone so quickly that anyone less attentive than Xiao would have missed it. When she spoke, her voice was firm and stable. "I have seen the Traveler and the new consultant of the Wangsheng Funeral Parlor doing their best to bring Rex Lapis peace, and as the secretary of the Qixing I can tell you with ease that they are doing all they can, and they deserve a little more credit. They are being distracted by Fatui, but they're working hard, and so am I!"

A flicker of satisfaction cast warmth through Xiao, just for a moment, with the knowledge that Ganyu was thriving and growing in her role in the city, but this flicker was quickly lost to the cold as Mountain Shaper snarled and shook the stone under them.

"Fine," Mountain Shaper snapped. "One will hold back on the conflict with the Qixing for now. But justice will be served for the death of Rex Lapis, and the Qixing would be wrong to think that the patience of the adepti could last very long!"

Moon Carver lowered his head. "That concludes this meeting, then. Thank you."

Thank Celestia.

◇ ◇ ◇

The day was still young when Xiao returned to the rooftop of Wangshu Inn, the noon sun just overhead, bright and welcomingly warm against his cold skin but unable to warm the chill of dread in his bones. For whatever reason, the smell of dreams was in the air, and Xiao couldn't tell if that was unsettling or comforting. The leaves of the ginkgo tree blocked the light from him, and he moved to drop lightly onto the uppermost balcony, chasing the sunbeams like a cat...

And he sighed.

The Traveler was seated alone on the warm planks, chin resting on her hands, face tilted slightly up towards the sky.

The temperature around Xiao seemed to drop again as his irritation rose, and he grimaced as the searing burn of karma stung the space behind his eyes. “Traveler.”

“Oh —” she turned her head quickly to look at him, but did not stand up. A genuine smile spread across her lips as she caught his gaze. “Xiao! Welcome home.”

He looked at her, *really* looked at her, for the first time. This was the Traveler that turned Mondstadt upside down. Xiao folded his arms, eyeing the Traveler analytically. She was unassuming, slight and shorter than he was, wearing an oddly clean white dress and impractical white flowers and feathers woven in her hair, large honey-colored eyes staring at Xiao with an unfathomable expression. She didn’t have a Vision. She didn’t look strong. She didn’t look like anyone that deserved the time of an adeptus, much less Venti or anyone else. “What do you want?” He asked emotionlessly.

She leaned back on her hands, still not moving her focus on his face. “I wanted to talk to you! I just need to hear some insider perspective, and there’s some freaking Fatui in the city, and I just don’t really want to be there right now.” She huffed out a laugh before gesturing vaguely to the area beside her on the balcony. “Do you want to sit?”

“No.” Xiao crossed his arms and looked away from her. Frosty cold spread from his chest to his throat, and he felt his temples throb impatiently. “If you have questions, ask your questions. Otherwise, leave.”

He expected some other quip or useless joke, but the Traveler straightened her spine and turned so that she faced him, looking up at him in a very defenseless position.

Considerate. Respectful.

Trespassing. Xiao shook his head, feeling his eyebrows draw together. *I don’t care.*

“Is it true that the adepti do not acknowledge the power of the Qixing in Liyue Harbor? And if you all start fighting, is it true that Liyue Harbor will be defenseless?” She asked, quickly but clearly.

His teeth clenched, further increasing the headache he had already felt coming on. For a moment he hesitated, but he had never been a liar. “It’s true,” he answered, bracing himself for the outburst that was sure to follow.

She’s going to yell at me to take a side. She’s going to be desperate and try to get me to help the Qixing. She’s going to shout and leave angrily and accuse me of betrayal and I’m just not going to give a shit because who is she anyway, I don’t owe anyone anything, I don’t care about anything, I don’t care I don’t care I DON’T CARE —

“Alright. Are you okay?” She asked, putting her hand on the balcony railing and slowly pulling herself to her feet, always keeping her hands where he could see.

“...” Xiao blinked his glassy eyes, holding back his confusion at her reaction. Wasn’t she on the side of the Qixing?

She inclined her head deferentially, and her voice was soft. “I don’t know what your relationship was to Rex Lapis, but given what I’ve heard from Ganyu and Zhongli, you were close. I’m really sorry for your loss.”

Xiao’s face twisted as he drew the inside of his cheek between his teeth. The place where he’d punctured the skin earlier still hadn’t healed. “I’m fine.”

The Traveler blinked, and the corner of her mouth twitched just a bit. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t *look* fine.”

Xiao scowled. “Then *stop looking*, Traveler,” he retorted without thinking.

“Hah!” The Traveler burst out laughing, throwing her head backwards, a little further over the balcony railing than could be considered careful, confident and sunny and exuding warmth and joy in even just her musical laugh.

Idiot, he cursed himself. *Why do you talk? Why are you bothering to speak to her?* He folded his arms a little more securely and closed his eyes.

“Alright, that’s a good point,” the Traveler said when she’d calmed down, still grinning. “I’m sorry for bothering you. Thank you for answering my questions.”

Xiao nodded curtly, waiting for her to leave.

When she didn’t, he cracked open his eyes to frown at her.

“Just one more question, I promise,” the Traveler said, holding up a finger as if Xiao didn’t know how many *one* was. “Will you attend Rex Lapis’s Rite of Parting?”

Cold shock slammed into Xiao’s chest, and he bit down on his lip, hard.

Rex Lapis.

Rex Lapis, Rex Lapis, Rex Lapis.

Don’t be gone. Come back and fix this. Please.

He released the breath he’d been holding, unclenching his teeth. At this point, his mouth would never heal from his constant flesh-tearing biting. “No.”

The Traveler nodded slowly. “Okay.”

She still didn’t move, burning curiosity glossing her bright yellow eyes. Xiao could see the internal battle working in her brain between her desire to ask *why* and her promise to ask only one more question.

If it will make her go away... Xiao sighed, a little more shakily than he would have liked. “I have never been to a funeral. I do not need to now. I am an adeptus, and human rituals do nothing for me. They don’t matter.”

“Oh, please don’t tell me that.” The Traveler wrinkled her nose. “If they don’t matter, then I’ve been running all over Liyue for nothing! Zhongli says that the funeral rites matter, he says that they matter to point that we had to go all the way back to Mondstadt to boil some noctilucous jade, and choose types of silk flowers, and bring sugared slime to the Jade Chamber for Ningguang, and create *three kinds of perfume*, and I found out that everyone everywhere is just trying to use everyone else, and it sucks. Keqing says that the time of the adepti is ending, but when I asked her to elaborate, she didn’t. I don’t like Ningguang, and I *want* to like Zhongli, and I *want* to find out what Childe is hiding from me, and I’m just trying to find my brother...”

Xiao blinked in surprise and confusion, unable to catch up with the sheer amount of information the Traveler was feeding him, names and events and opinions and *sugared slime* — ? For a minute his mind cleared, focusing and forgetting how cold he was as he listened to the Traveler speak.

She sighed and turned back to the Liyue landscape, leaning over the rail, the breeze blowing the longer strands of her wispy blonde hair across her face. She closed her eyes, and she seemed to age thousands of immortal years right in front of Xiao.

He inhaled sharply as a wave of her fear and despair and loneliness swept over him, familiar cold and dark. He took a couple of steps forward, instinctually moving further into the sun next to the Traveler, shivering slightly as he rested his hands on the rail.

What happened to this girl's brother? Who was she, anyway? Xiao snuck a glance in his peripheral, suddenly acutely aware that the being next to him had much, much more history than he was currently able to sense. What did she know? What could she do? What weapon did she use? She'd saved Mondstadt without a Vision, but *how had he overlooked that?* There was a mystery in the Traveler...

He shook his head.

But I don't care. He didn't need to delve into this mystery. He didn't need another connection to anyone. In the end, this Traveler was objectively someone that he could not involve himself with. *I don't care.*

His golden eyes hardened, and he cast his eyes away from her.

"Sorry," she murmured. "I didn't mean to dump all of that information on you. I know it means nothing to you. But I feel like you're the only one that actually tells me the truth straightforwardly, without smoke screens or subtext, and I appreciate that about you..." She grinned then, and suddenly all the immortal maturity that she'd held was replaced by vibrant liveliness. "... Even though I feel like you don't like me."

"Hmf." Xiao scoffed immediately. "I *don't* like you."

"Why?" The Traveler blinked. "I'm lovely."

A small huff of disbelief left Xiao's lips before he could stop himself, and he shook his head incredulously. He'd never met any mortal or mundane being before that would dare to speak so casually with him in his own space, much less push his emotional buttons in such a way. *How do I even respond to that?*

Luckily for him, the Traveler didn't seem to expect a response. "It hasn't all been bad in Liyue, by the way. I didn't quite do it justice when I said all of that. I got to keep the leftover perfume that Zhongli didn't need for the funeral. I've been using this one called 'Golden House Maiden;' it's supposed to smell like dreams. Whatever that means." She lifted her wrist to her nose and sniffed it tentatively.

Ah.

That would explain it.

Of course this random girl whose name you already forgot smells like the one thing in the world you want that you can't have.

The smell of dreams soothed the aching pain of stabbing karma in his very being, but the temptation to hunt some down was stronger than he would have liked. Xiao still didn't know if he thought the smell was unsettling or comforting.

He was still deciding when the Traveler spoke the words that irreversibly ruined his life.

“Rex Lapis likes a different perfume, so we just saved all of that one for the funeral. It’s called ‘Fate’s Yearning,’ and apparently it’s used by ‘more mature’ ladies.” The Traveler made a face. “I guess Rex Lapis has a thing for older women.”

“Ugh!” Xiao turned away, disgust turning his stomach and twisting his face. *“What in Teyvat?!”*

The Traveler burst out in that sunny laughter again. “Ahhh, I’m sorry! I’m sorry! Too much information, I’m sorry.” She waited for him to turn back towards her, purposefully ignoring his glare, dropping her voice to a softer tone. “Was he a father figure to you?”

“Mm.” Xiao muttered, rubbing his temples, still repressing an intrusive image of Rex Lapis and a Madame-Ping-lookalike out of his mind.

She nodded in understanding. “Venti told me that he was very personal with Liyue, completely different from how The Tone-Deaf Bard reigns over Mondstadt, if you can even call that reigning.” She folded her arms on the balcony railing, resting her head on her hands. “I wish I could have met Rex Lapis. He sounds like he was very wise.”

“He was.” *She’d called him Venti.* Things must really be changing in Teyvat if any strange Outlander could simply refer to *Barbatos, Archon of Anemo* as insultingly as *‘The Tone-Deaf Bard.’*

Xiao was surprisingly at peace with that bit of information. If his conversation with the Traveler had taught him anything, it was that Teyvat had changed completely, even outside of Liyue.

A change was on the rise.

But I don’t care. I don’t care.

I can’t care.

“Thank you again for speaking to me,” the Traveler said, bowing her head respectfully. “I apologize for intruding on your rooftop earlier... And for doing it again just now.”

Xiao folded his arms again. “What will you do when the conflict between the adepti and Qixing reaches its peak?”

“Hmm,” the Traveler hummed thoughtfully. “I don’t know yet. Everyone seems to believe that there are only two sides here. Zhongli asked me if I would use my neutrality to mediate for you all stupid Liyuens, or if I’d help one of you fight.”

Xiao laughed in reflex, just a short breath through his nose, but a laugh nonetheless. “As if an Outlander could take on the adepti.”

The Traveler’s eyes narrowed. “There’s a lot about me you don’t know, Xiao.”

“I know I could beat you in a fight.”

“You want to try?” she challenged, smile growing sideways.

“I would,” he answered flatly, “but I don’t want to get your human blood on my floor.”

She laughed again, warm and genuine. “Ha! Uhm. Well.” She tapped her chin. “Maybe not now, then. What will you be doing later?”

The reminder of Xiao’s job, of his contract, of the fact that the night would descend in just a few

hours, fell upon his back like a physical burden, and his shoulders ached. He turned to check the sun's position in the sky. "I have a long night ahead."

"Ah. Well, I probably do, too," the Traveler said, opening her glider. "I have to go find Paimon. I'm about to go hunt down a stupid ginger."

Everything that this girl said just confused Xiao to no end, mentally and emotionally and even historically. "... Ginger?"

"Just a Fatui Harbinger with red hair."

That did nothing to answer his question.

"Anyway!" The Traveler jumped up to stand on the balcony railing, effectively shooting Xiao's blood pressure higher than it had been in a while, balancing back and forth on the smooth surface. "We'll talk soon, Xiao."

No, we won't. His head was spinning. He had work to do. He had a contract. He wanted dreams. He wanted to slay demons. He wanted to find Rex Lapis's killer. He *really* wanted the Traveler to stop balancing on the railing so she wouldn't fall. *We will not.*

"I can tell you don't think we will, but we will."

I don't care. I don't care. I can't care. "Mm."

She smiled and tucked her hair behind her ear, fingers brushing the white flowers on the right side of her head. "I like you, Xiao. I hope we'll be fighting on the same side. It's just too bad you can be kind of a jerk," she stated, softly but matter-of-factly.

I don't care. "I don't care," he said aloud, deliberate and without any emotion. "I'll protect you if it comes to it, but you better stay out of my way."

"Oh, don't worry. I won't need your saving." She turned and kicked off of the railing, opening her glider and turning south. "See you later."

Xiao didn't answer.

He sat on the sun-warmed planks of the balcony.

Too close, I don't care, too close, dreamsdreamsdreams! too close too close, just a weapon, you are just a weapon and nothing else, don't care, just take a deep fucking breath and calm down, breathe breathe breathe, too close, what the hell do you think you're doing, she doesn't care about you, she isn't on the same side as you, YOU CANNOT TALK TO THE TRAVELER AGAIN.

Rex Lapis was still gone. The conflict was only going to get worse. Everything was going to change. To exist was to hurt and lose. But Xiao only had one job, and as long as he could focus on that, he could not possibly get hurt by anything else changing.

Inhale.

Exhale.

I am just a weapon. I don't care about anything. Liyue can pass me by.

I truly have nothing left to lose.

Despite these thoughts, he was oddly calm.

For the first time in days, he had felt something other than cold and numb; for the first time in days, he was no longer shivering.

Chapter End Notes

Hi Friends, I missed you <3

I wanna manage expectations and say:

1) This is not a return to regular updates; I'm hoping to update again maybe next month but my life is getting freaking wild and it's a lot. I'm sorry :(but of course, regular reassurance that I WILL FINISH THIS IF IT'S THE LAST THING I DO. can you believe we're getting closer to one year since i started?

2) Lumine in this story is exactly how I want to write her. This is not a self-insert, so she might seem ooc to you, but she is right for me and will of course develop as time passes :) I understand if you don't read further though, and thank you for reading as long as you did <3

3) Part of me still knows that this isn't my best work. Probably when this is entirely finished I'll do some editing (I still haven't made the ones that I said I'd do in chapters back). But I hope you enjoy it anyway; I did the best that I could for now and that's enough for me

4) THANK YOU. I WOULD NOT HAVE THE MOTIVATION TO DO THIS WITHOUT YOUR AMAZING COMMENTS AND CONTINUED READERSHIP. PLEASE LEAVE ME COMMENTS BECAUSE THEY REALLY DO DRIVE ME.

I've also been working on a 5-chapter Kazuha backstory as a writing practice for this. Do you wanna see it?

I love you in the best way that I can <3

Follow me on [Twitter](#)

The Turning Point

Chapter Notes

Tw; war, panic attack, PTSD flashback. all the good stuff (/j)

my heart is pounding, i'm so anxious x_x i hope you guys like this. action from start to finish.

thank you for waiting for me <3

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The night of slaying demons never started.

Not exactly.

Not when just an hour or so after the Traveler flew off of his balcony, the sky turned black, the sea ascended to the land, and the Qixing summoned all of the adepti to the docks of Liyue Harbor as they flew towards the bay in the Tianquan's Jade Chamber.

When Xiao felt the first tremor of Hydro energy shift all the air in the world, his stomach dropped into his feet, and there it stayed with every hope he'd ever felt. The wind churned around him, steaming-hot and suffocating sulfur and salty with seawater, but he shivered as though he'd plummeted to the depths of the Abyss and fell out of the sky with a crash onto the Jade Chamber. He hadn't been ready. He hadn't had time to prepare.

Osial. Osial. Osial.

Osial screamed, skull-shattering noise that echoed across the land, rippling through his five throats and his five monstrous serpentine heads and deep into the space at the center of Xiao's head, raining down Hydro energy across the docks, soaking Qixing and adepti alike, creating vicious cyclones and blasts just like the ones that killed so many adepti and two yakshas centuries ago—

He was different, for sure; less aware, more eroded, more like a sea monster and less like a god than he had ever, ever been —

But this knowledge did not stop Xiao from seizing up as the overwhelming *largeness* and *powerful majesty* of the Overlord of the Vortex washed over him, taking away all his breath and all his movement and all his rational thought, just the smell of sulfur and the taste of dirty water and

Osial. Osial. Osial.

People were talking, adepti were shouting, no one could agree on anything, it was all just a buzz in Xiao's ears, everyone blind to the fear and panic and petrifying terror in his eyes, arguing about method, debating about fault, shame and anger and stubbornness and prayers all whirling in his head while someone was grabbing his shoulder and *turning him towards them* —

Xiao dashed away with a *crack* of Anemo energy, eyes darting up, having pushed away whoever had touched him purely out of reflex.

“Xiao!” The Traveler called over the sound of the rushing wind and water, raising both hands and

furrowing her eyebrows as she noticed his state. “Are you okay?”

He shivered again, balling his hands into fists, trying to breathe in and doing his best not to black out, lips hardly able to form the only words he could think of. “What are you doing here?”

“What are you *adepti* doing here?” The Traveler asked, eyes red from the stinging air and wide with confusion. “Weren’t you disagreeing with the Qixing?”

“In light of recent events, we have agreed to put our differences aside!” Ningguang answered in a commanding tone from somewhere on the platform.

“Mmph,” Moon Carver grunted in reply.

The pink fairy at the Traveler’s side whistled lowly, looking up at the monstrosity before them that was Osial. “Whoa. The Archon War was fought against *that* guy? Now that’s scary...”

Xiao hunched over, pressing his hands to his temples, looking down at the Jade Chamber platform of energy that Ningguang had created, watching with razor focus as tiny droplets of hot water struck the stone, listening as best he could while trying not to totally dissociate.

“Is the power of the Qixing, Millelith, and Adepti enough to stop the monster?”

“... Not necessarily.”

“This is why One did a little tinkering to turn these ballista, the Guizhong ballista, into engines of war beyond your wildest thoughts.”

“We are thankful.”

“We haven’t a moment to spare. Our battle begins now!”

“The Fatui!! They’re attacking the Guizhong Ballista!!”

Golden flashes from the ballista and colored energy from elemental power reflected on the wet stone as the Qixing and the Traveler rushed to defend the adepti from the attacking Fatui that appeared suddenly through portals.

Xiao did not move. He slowly lowered himself into a crouch, eyes still on the stone.

They couldn’t possibly win. They couldn’t *possibly* make this work. Adepti, working with humans, without Rex Lapis? *Our Archon is dead and we can’t function without him and there’s no point even trying and we can’t and we can’t and we can’t and we CAN’T—*

His heart bit deeply into itself, karmic energy crushing his body into itself, and Xiao doubled over in pain. The wave would surely pass by, he was just tired and overwhelmed *you’re just tired and overwhelmed so breathe and grab on to what’s real it doesn’t matter what, it doesn’t matter what it’s not hard just do it—*

A small gasp of pain escaped from his lips and he clawed at his own chest as if he could relieve the pressure by breaking his own ribs and reaching into his heart and releasing himself from the prickling burn of physical karmic pain that dragged him further and further from reality, distancing him further and further down until the air turned to blood and he could feel the bodies of his victims clawing at his feet and *he could hear his Master, he could HEAR HIM—*

“You don’t make good decisions for yourself.”

“That’s why you need me to make them for you.”

“You can’t even move right now. Pathetic.”

“Don’t you wish I was there to help you and tell you what to do? Didn’t I protect you from Osial once before? Don’t you want me to come protect you again?”

Osial’s power crushed Xiao’s physical body, Zhui’s power echoed in grating laughter through his semi-conscious mind, and karmic energy tore the fiber of his being apart with *every. Single. Breath.*

Then the Traveler crashed into the stone right next to him from the force of a Hydro sphere before immediately leaping back to her feet as though it hadn’t happened. “Holy shit,” she mumbled. “What the heck was that?!”

The voices dissipated. Xiao’s eyes opened and shut slowly.

If anything, shock and surprise grounded him more than anything Kimaris could have possibly said, and the return to reality was almost more abrupt than the sound of the Hydro sphere. Xiao blinked at the soaking-wet Traveler, struggling to put words together after the snap back to full consciousness. “That is…” *What is it?* “Uh… That is Osial’s divine power.” He grimaced. “I am… Very familiar with it. Be careful not to get hit.”

“Oh, I’m fine!” The Traveler grinned at him before taking off again towards the nearest Fatui agent. “Thank you for the warning!”

How is she still standing? Xiao’s eye twitched.

“Come on, now,” Madame Ping chuckled gently, even as the battle raged around her. “Conqueror of Demons, do you still not see?”

No..?

“Don’t lose heart, children!” Madame Ping called to the Traveler. “Here, take this!”

The old woman stretched out her arms towards the Traveler’s blonde head, extending her adeptal energies, passing them into the Traveler until she glowed.

“Wait, Madame,” Xiao said abruptly, still fighting to process the real world and repress the voices clawing at the edges of his mind. “Can a human handle your adeptal energy—?”

“Wow, it’s Madame Ping’s shockwave!” The fairy shouted. “This granny’s really strong!”

What?

Then Ganyu landed easily on the stone next to him, Cryo energy refreshing his skin from the hot air and allowing him to take a shaky breath in, even as she called out to the Traveler. “Cast your fear of injury by the wayside and fight with all your might!” She reached her hands out, offering her defensive adeptal energy.

The Traveler *glowed*, literally glowed like a star, the brightest and warmest light on the Jade Chamber even among the gold ballista and Ningguang’s Geo power and flashing amethyst Keqing and all of the technological power of the Fatui. Her skin glowed with the power of two adepts, and she swung her sword back to blast a Fatui skirmisher off the side of the Jade Chamber with a round blast of Anemo — *but she didn’t have a Vision????* — and swiping her foot in a circle with Geo

constructs following in contact — *BUT SHE DIDN'T HAVE A VISION???* — she was a maelstrom more impressive than the one summoned by Osial, a one-person dual-elemental army, a force of nature in the body of a fifty-kilo inhuman being wearing an impractical white dress.

What are you?

“Xiao! *Xiao!*” Ganyu was saying desperately in his ear, clearly doing her best not to make contact, though he still flinched away. “Xiao, please, if you can’t help her fight, then *help her!* Give her your adeptal energy, okay?”

He knit his eyebrows, wrestling to pull himself together.

“Trust me!” Ganyu said, “please, trust me. Help her.”

I've never done this before, he wanted to say, but he raised his hand towards the fighting figure of the Traveler as if it was the most natural thing in the world, offering up whatever he could, watching as she glowed all the brighter behind the dark silhouette of his hand.

Xiao breathed, still a little too shaken to speak very loudly. “Take my power, and run as I do.”

The Traveler skidded across the wet stone a little as Xiao’s adeptal swiftness flooded through her, but she quickly adapted, dashing across the platform to attack another skirmisher, propelling herself with Geo formations below her feet. A lilt of excitement crossed her face as she realized how fast she was going. “Wait, *what?!* This is amazing!”

“Wonderful, child!” Madame Ping praised. “You can withstand three forms of adeptal energy at once!”

“Please bear with us if it hurts!” Ganyu called worriedly. “And *exercise caution!* I think that Osial’s power has reached its peak!”

The Yuheng, Keqing, stabbed another skirmisher off of the Jade Chamber with an Electro *snap*, and Xiao distantly acknowledged that she must have accepted her Vision after the last years. “The Fatui are thinning! In other words, if we hold here, it can’t possibly get worse, right?”

Are they... Really... Winning?

“The interlopers are no more!” Moon Carver shouted to his fellow beast adepti. “Let us commit ourselves fully!”

The ballistas worked in unison under the guidance of the adepti. Osial screamed again as they fired ceaselessly at him, and the piercing cry of pain did not leave Xiao terror-stricken.

In fact, he *reveled* in it.

A warm feeling spread through his fingers, and he shivered.

I hope it burns.

I hope it burns. I hope it feels like drills in your eyes and tears you apart cell by cell. I hope each blast reminds you of every horrible fucking thing you've ever done. I hope that wherever you're going, there is no return, no escape, and eternal vengeance on your soul. I hope you die slow.

I. Hope. You. Burn.

“It’s working!” Paimon shouted, shrill voice a sharp contrasting interruption to Xiao’s dark

thoughts. “We just need to keep this up!”

Xiao felt his energy return to him, and he tore his eyes away from the sea monster to look at the Traveler.

She was panting slightly, but she looked unhurt among the sparkling water striking the platform. The bright warmth of adeptal energy had almost completely dried all the saltwater that had soaked her, and her pale yellow bangs were slightly wavy and fluffy. Somehow, those white flowers in her hair were still in place. She was looking up at Ningguang, who was still using all her energy to keep the platform under their feet intact — but then she turned and caught Xiao’s eye, just for a second.

And she smiled, eyes crinkling at the edges, like she was genuinely happy to see him.

Hm.

Then Osial reared his heads, screaming, and beams of concentrated Hydro energy hurtled towards the ballista.

“*Retreat!*” Keqing shouted, shooting through the air with a flash of electricity, projecting her voice to all the soldiers on the platform, desperation cutting through any and all of her usual composure. “Millelith, *retreat!*”

Xiao moved quickly in front of Madame Ping to shield her from the intense wind, crossing his arm in front of his face, grimacing as the force of the blasts blew his streamers straight backwards. Salt stung at his eyes.

Cracks started forming in the platform of energy, and Ningguang shook with the effort of holding it together, her eyes and face turning red from concentration.

“They’re going to fall!” Madame Ping shouted, right in Xiao’s ringing ear, but loud enough for everyone to hear. “Adepti, you have to catch them!”

Exactly at that moment, the platform exploded into a million shards of shattered crystalline light. The ballista broke into pieces and Millelith plummeted towards the sea and the beast adepti swooped in to catch them as they fell and—

Xiao’s vision tunneled.

In the midst of the screaming chaos, there was a tumbling mass of white dress and blonde hair.

No thoughts, just action.

One.

No fear of Osial.

Two.

No fear of failure.

Three.

No fear of getting too close.

Four.

Just Lumine in his arms.

Five.

Breathe in, breathe out.

Six.

In five bursts, he had caught the Traveler and brought them both back to the Jade Chamber, adepti and Millelith and Qixing touching down all around them.

"Whoa," the Traveler gasped. Her eyes were blown wide with surprise, and Xiao could sense her trying very hard to catch her breath after the very eventful last ten seconds. Her arm was slung over him for support, heavy on his shoulders, but she was slipping off and pitching forward—

Xiao instinctively grabbed her hand and looped his other arm around her waist, holding up all of her weight even as he swayed from the contact. "Hey," he murmured. "Be careful, now."

She lifted her yellow eyes to meet his gaze. "Mmhm," she nodded, still trembling slightly.

Xiao's eyes narrowed. He shifted his hold on her hand and, without thinking, lightly squeezed her fingers in assurance.

The Traveler smiled in the corner of his eye.

"*The Guizhong Ballista is destroyed,*" Cloud Retainer reported loudly, drawing both of their attention with the uncertainty in her voice. "Without its covering fire, retaliation shall be difficult."

"But the Jade Chamber is our last line of defense!" Ganyu said, voice slightly forced and shrill. "We can't give another inch, no matter what!"

Ningguang, recomposed, pursed her lips and pinched her eyes together. "I have another idea."

"What is it?" Keqing asked urgently.

Ningguang turned her head and glanced at Xiao, and he winced under her red-eyed stare — until her prayer flashed through his mind.

Adeptus, lend me your power.

The Tianquan often activated all sorts of alarms in Xiao's mind, but now, with her words and intentions in his heart, they found a mutual understanding: *she was going to bring the whole floating castle down as the ultimate sacrifice she could make for the country that she loved.*

The Traveler had steadied on her feet. Xiao slipped out from under her arm.

"I will sacrifice the Jade Chamber," Ningguang said with an air of finality.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Cloud Retainer asked sharply at the same time that Xiao placed his mask on his face.

I understand.

"Traveler, come. Lend us a hand," Ningguang commanded, and the Traveler drew her sword.

The voices were familiar as ever, chanting as his limbs seized and the skin cells started to smoke

before his eyes, *everything is all your fault and you deserve this we hate you hate you hate you HATE YOU YOU DID THIS TO US —*

Not today. Xiao shook his head and channeled all the power to the stone beneath his feet, sending pulses focusing all his Anemo energy into tearing the rock apart. Over the voices, he could hear all his fellow adepti doing the same, hammering Geo and Cryo energy into the Jade Chamber like a heartbeat, swirling and reverberating as the Traveler lifted her sword and plunged it into the center of the circle. The Jade Chamber dropped like a rock directly onto the Overlord of the Vortex.

It was not as good as a stele directly created by Rex Lapis. In Osial's prime, there was no way that the Jade Chamber would have been enough to seal him away. But the castle made contact, the sea monster screeched one last time, that was the end of Osial, and Xiao could breathe again.

Finally.

◇ ◇ ◇

The sun broke through the clouds as the water from the blast settled. Moon Carver and Cloud Retainer, carrying Keqing and the Traveler respectively, flew through the sky, landing lightly on the docks just as Xiao teleported himself and Madame Ping down. The light was beautiful on the still-settling waves, as if signaling the dawn of another new beginning. Xiao could feel it, even to the outskirts of the city. The demons usually sent by Osial's rage had eroded away along with his consciousness. Liyue had once again defeated Osial, but only through the efforts of the Qixing combined with the power of the adepti. A change was on the rise.

Unfortunately, Xiao could tell by Mountain Shaper's scowl that this victory was going to be followed by a very difficult conversation.

It's not over yet.

"Is it finally over?" Paimon squeaked, unobservant as ever.

Moon Carver made a low rumbling sound in his throat. "The power of the monster has indeed begun to fade. It will be some time, millennia even, before the Overlord of the Vortex can make any waves again."

"We are indebted to you for your assistance," Ningguang said, now fully composed and sugary sweet once again. Xiao cringed inwardly. "If you, the adepti, hadn't been here, we surely would have been in great jeopardy."

Cloud Retainer scoffed, as best a crane could. "Spare us your flattery, Tianquan. Surely you would not pretend to have forgotten the reason for which we came? After all of this, will you not surrender the city to the adepti?"

Archons. Xiao rolled his eyes all the way up into his head until he felt the strain on his optic nerves. *I hate this. I hate this back and forth, I hate these meetings so much. I hate this.*

"Oh, come now!" Madame Ping smiled gaily. "The Tianquan had sacrificed much to build the Jade Chamber, and now she has sacrificed it all to protect Liyue. That deserves recognition, don't you agree?"

"Well." Ningguang tapped her nail guards against her temple. "I was hoping you would consider this sacrifice in our little discussion, now."

Madame Ping gave the Tianquan a look, as if to say, *don't be on the wrong side of the one adeptus*

advocating for you.

Ningguang totally ignored her. “I regret to inform you that we cannot yield to your wishes. Your contract with Rex Lapis to protect Liyue was signed 3,700 years ago, and even you must admit that Liyue today is not at all the same city as it was all those years ago. Do not merely cast your protective gaze upon the land. Focus your sights on our city, and each of the citizens that dwell within it. Think of what is best for the people.”

It's true. Xiao thought back to the days that he watched Guizhong teaching the few humans of Guili how to plant vegetables, then to the impressive technological feats of the humans now. Even Wangshu Inn, Xiao's home, was a feat of humans. *We can't disagree with her.*

His fellow adepti didn't seem to agree. Mountain Shaper, in particular, clawed at the ground.

“I mean no offense,” Ningguang continued. “But last night, this morning, Rex Lapis appeared to me in a dream, and I believe it to be a sign.”

Xiao blanched.

Cloud Retainer's aura grew dark, and Xiao took a physical step away from her. “*You dare speak of Rex Lapis so flippantly—!*”

Ningguang kept speaking, voice level and matter-of-fact, as though she hadn't heard Cloud Retainer at all. “We the Qixing are mortal, but we have just as much of a contract as you adepti do to protect Liyue through our leadership. I wished to tell him this, but I could not speak. I only gazed at him in silence until I awoke. But I could feel his approval of my ideals, and I believe his intention has been made clear.” She folded her arms, looking around expectantly as if she had just made the most poignant speech in history.

Cloud Retainer's beak dropped open in shock.

Oof. Xiao closed his eyes and sighed, frustration and astonishment at Ningguang's boldness churning into a solid, irritated headache as he tried not to visibly cringe. He curled his fingers as tightly as he could, exhaling slowly as his nails dug sharply into his palms. All he could hear was Keqing's hair swishing as she shook her head back and forth, the scrabbling of hooves on the dock, and angrily flapping crane wings. Maybe he could just stand back and let whatever happened happen. It wasn't like he cared particularly for either the adepti or the humans running Liyue Harbor. *I really want no part in this.*

Fortunately, the Traveler cut in before the beast adepti could mutually begin tearing the Tianquan apart. “I think what Ningguang is *trying* to say is that we're all on the same side here. When the people and the guardians that are meant to defend them are not at peace, then there can *be* no peace.” She tilted her head and smiled. “I learned something kind of like this in Mondstadt.”

When freedom is forced upon the people, it loses its meaning.

When protection is forced upon the people, it loses its meaning.

The Traveler understands.

Xiao relaxed his shoulders, just a tiny bit.

Mountain Shaper shook his head in disbelief. “Do you make us a laughing stock, chastising us as an Outlander?”

“Not at all,” the Traveler replied easily. “I’m just offering my perspective.”

“And what makes you think your perspective holds any merit with us?” Mountain Shaper demanded, wings trembling.

“Heh. Because you would have been lost without me in that honestly rather anti-climactic battle?” The Traveler answered, voice mild and even, phrasing every word as a suggestion. “Because I believe that I’ve proved myself to care very much about your country regardless of reward? Or maybe, because I did not go through a fight with the Eleventh Fatui Harbinger and countless Snezhnayans in war machines *and then help you defeat a giant sea monster*, just for you to tear your country apart with political in-fighting?” She shrugged. “I would hope that my assistance and support in this time would warrant the consideration of my perspective. But what do I know? Maybe that’s just me.”

Mountain Shaper's beak fell open as well. Everyone stared at the Traveler in silence. Even Ningguang looked shocked.

Oh, I hate this. Xiao pulled his lip in between his teeth, still tasting of blood and not healed from the last time he’d bitten through it, and braced himself for the certainly impending fight. *I hate this I hate this I hate this*—

“Granny! Hey, Granny, you’re safe!!!”

Adepti and Qixing alike jumped as a small Liyuen child sprinted up at full speed to throw her small arms around Madame Ping, startling Mountain Shaper, who flapped his wings dangerously. It was never, ever a good idea to run up to a group of angry adepti.

But the little girl bounced up and down for joy, completely fearless, or completely clueless. “Hello, everyone! We beat the big monster!! Why do you all look so sad?”

Xiao sighed and shut his eyes tightly, pressing the bridge of his nose between two fingers. There were too many people around, he was wildly overstimulated, and he could feel his anxiety and irritation rising to join his already pounding headache. *I hate this.*

Madame Ping just laughed. “Weren’t you scared, Changchang? It was quite the predicament, wasn’t it?”

“I wasn’t afraid,” The child insisted, clearly unabashed and fully confident in her safety, even standing in the center of some of the most powerful beings in her entire nation. “The Millelith, and the birdies and the deer, and the powerful heroes with their Visions were there, and everyone was there! Thanks for protecting Liyue!” She clapped her hands, looking up at Xiao, who happened to be the nearest adeptus to her. “Thanks, Mister Conqueror of Demons! Please come visit us for the next Lantern Rite!”

The Traveler audibly clapped her hand over her mouth, hiding a smile, but Xiao could see her lips forming the words *the birdies and the deer*.

Xiao just blinked. Beside him, he could sense Moon Carver’s confusion, too. After years of trespassing worshippers, *since when did the humans actually thank the adepti?* “Um,” he said, cursing himself for being so caught off guard. “We won’t be able to participate.”

“Why not?”

Why not? “... Because we’re adepti.”

“Oh.” The child’s eyes were big behind her eyeglasses. “It must be hard being an adeptus.”

The Traveler laughed and patted the child’s head. “Awwwh, you’re cute!”

Madame Ping’s face was set, though gentle still as she turned to face the adepti again. “See how Liyue is today? They are grateful for the adepti, but it is no longer necessary for them to rely on us for every little thing. The time of contracts between gods and Liyue has passed; now is the time of contracts between Liyue and its people.”

“Mm.” Mountain Shaper ruffled his feathers begrudgingly, clearly still somewhat upset but naturally holding onto his pride. “Madame Ping may have a point. In any case, it’s true that we look somewhat out of place...” He tilted his head slightly. “Don’t we, Cloud Retainer?”

“You ask the wrong person,” Cloud Retainer snapped back. “*You* spearheaded this expedition.”

That’s enough of this.

“Let’s go now,” Xiao interjected, fully uncaring of how rude he was at this point. His social limit had been met ages ago, and the pressure behind his eyes from the earlier teleportations was starting to trickle down from his headache to the rest of his body. The temperature around him dropped, even with the sun shining down. He’d seen the battle through and attended the meeting of the adepti, fulfilling all of his duties, and now he turned without further words or patience and started walking towards the city without waiting to be dismissed.

“Conqueror of Demons!” Moon Carver called after him. “I still have concerns! Why are you so eager to leave?”

Xiao gritted his teeth and feigned deafness.

He felt the eyes of all on his back. He felt the thoughts of the Traveler following him and some kind of mixed emotion from Ganyu and the weirdly sick satisfaction from Ningguang and the irritation of the beast adepti and the relief of every single individual citizen in Liyue and it was just too much, just too much, and even the release of pressure on Xiao’s own shoulders to maintain his contract did not cause him any pleasure because the one question, the one thought, the one concern that had been on his mind for weeks now still caused prickles of icy dread and uncertainty and fear to twist deep into his heart.

What is the point of surviving now?

Chapter End Notes

"The bane of our existence: "writer's block." It's your arch-nemesis for life, appearing without warning and inflicting a pain worse than death upon the writer. They sell their souls just to get their muse back... When this happens, the best thing you can do is have a bite to eat and take a proper break."

- Yae Miko

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Alone but Not Lonely, Part 1

Chapter Summary

Maybe he was here to enact vengeance for Rex Lapis. Maybe he was meant to hunt down whoever killed him, and serve them the justice they deserved, but even that seemed to fade in light of the fact that it wouldn't bring Rex Lapis back to life. In the end, karma would have its way anyway regardless of the way that a being died, or who killed him. Sure, the sealing of Osial was much more satisfying than the death of Zhui was, but they would both end up eroded in hell by the end of time. It didn't matter. *Nothing* mattered.

Xiao grimaced as a wave of full-body pain pierced his soul, another reminder of his own karmic debt and the inescapable hell he had to look forward to, and he walked slowly into the cold lake at the center of the mountaintop.

Chapter Notes

tw SPOILERS; self-harm, suicidal thoughts/attempt :D proceed with caution

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In the mindless dawn that followed that horrible night, Xiao wandered idly around Minlin. The entire time, he hadn't seen a single possessed hilichurl. The demons that had frequented the land for so long had all but eroded.

The battle was over. Liyue was safe. Osial was sealed. He should be happy.

He kind of wanted a dream. A human's dream. Or a god's dream. Something that would make him *feel something*.

Somehow, Xiao found himself back at Mount Aocang, running his fingers on the smooth and well-kept stone of the table where Guizhong and Rex Lapis used to sit. Cloud Retainer had set up engraved stone seats as well as cups and bowls at the table, just in memory of the friends that she had lost, but it all just looked so depressingly neat and staged. He wished he knew how to make zhenxinsan, but the thought nagged in the back of his mind that he was probably so far gone that it wouldn't even be able to help him.

The Traveler had been right. The battle *had* been anticlimactic.

What had he actually expected? He basically was useless the whole time, paralyzed by a panic attack from a trauma that happened ages ago. He was dumb, *so dumb*, for letting it affect him to such an extent.

Maybe if you'd talked about it with someone while you still could—

Xiao shook his head. *No*. The battle had been anticlimactic because the Traveler had been so

talented, so intuitive, and so capable. Liyue had come together, but she had been a major catalyst in their success. She was impressive, and powerful, and able to handle all that energy, and true to his promise, Xiao had protected her! He had caught her! He had stepped so far out of his comfort zone just by allowing her to make physical contact with him...

... And he'd let her get close to him. He'd relied on her to fight the battle he should have fought.

Idiot.

He made a fist and slammed his knuckles against the stone table, relishing in the shattering pain that shot up his arm. *I'm an idiot for allowing someone to make me feel safe again.* She hadn't even defeated Osial alone, so it wasn't like she was even *that* important.

She cannot possibly be human.

But she's not like me.

I will never be safe.

None of this line of thinking answered his questions. Ultimately, the Traveler didn't matter. The battle was over. Liyue was safe. Osial was sealed. He should be happy. And yet Xiao remained.

Why?

Maybe he was here to enact vengeance for Rex Lapis. Maybe he was meant to hunt down whoever killed him, and serve them the justice they deserved, but even that seemed to fade in light of the fact that it wouldn't bring Rex Lapis back to life. In the end, karma would have its way anyway regardless of the way that a being died, or who killed him. Sure, the sealing of Osial was much more satisfying than the death of Zhui was, but they would both end up eroded in hell by the end of time. It didn't matter. *Nothing* mattered.

Xiao grimaced as a wave of full-body pain pierced his soul, another reminder of his own karmic debt and the inescapable hell he had to look forward to, and he walked slowly into the cold lake at the center of the mountaintop.

Zhui's voice shot through his memory.

"Learn this now and remember it, Alatus. Death is the easy way out. Staying alive, being true to your word, being true to your contracts, is much, much harder."

Xiao tilted his head and looked at his hands in the water.

Death is the easy way out.

Death is the easy way out.

Death is the easy way out.

He took off his gauntlets and tossed them behind him. The scars on his wrists where iron shackles had bit him for centuries were shiny and silver, thin skin drawn tightly over pale blue veins, like a perforation. Like an instruction.

Like one last gift from his old Master.

Xiao summoned his spear.

Back and forth, up and down his forearms, he drew lines, tearing up bits of skin and flesh that flaked and fell into the water, over and over, jade cutting deep until the perforations opened and dripped and released the life that they had trapped in this useless ‘beautiful’ ‘powerful’ body that he had never asked for, flowing out and tinting the water in the color of karma until Xiao’s fingers could no longer hold the pole and it slipped from his weak grasp.

Once he was gone, he’d just have to pay off his karmic debt in whatever pathetic afterlife followed, for years or for centuries or for millennia, but *then* he wouldn’t have to do anything ever again. Then, maybe then, his consciousness could find the eroded remains of the people he’d loved.

He ran their names over the fuzz of his mind. *Bonanus. Antheas. Somnius. Pervases. Menogias. Bosacius. Guizhong. Indarias.*

Maybe they would even forgive him for what happened to them, as unworthy as he was.

Rex Lapis, I hope to see you soon.

He fell backwards in the water, or maybe the water flew upwards and encompassed him, and closed his eyes. Early morning sunshine cut through his eyelids, weaving the web of their tangled vessels in front of him.

Breathe out.

“Xiao, *what the fuck do you think you’re doing?!*”

Strong hands grabbed the back of Xiao’s shirt and hauled him out of the water, muttering a string of curses and what might have been incantations but all sounded like nothing to Xiao. He cracked open his eyes, blinking streams away.

The figure of Rex Lapis stood over him, silhouetted in the bright sunlight.

“If I’m seeing you, then I’m definitely close to death,” Xiao murmured. “Thank you.”

“You are definitely close to death, but I’m not a ghost, Xiao, come on,” the silhouette of Rex Lapis groaned. “Don’t you pull a *Romeo and Juliet* on me. Do not.” Xiao could feel some kind of substance being spread on his forearms and bound in place with purple strips of silk he hazily recognized as his own streamers. “I’m going to wrap up your wrists, Xiao,” the voice over him continued. “It will be unpleasant, but don’t panic. You are safe. You’re with me.”

Xiao frowned; the edges of his vision were getting sharper, and he could feel the silk streamers, gentle but firm on his skin, stinging the gashes. “You’re just a manifestation of my karma, then, if you’re not a ghost. Are you here to torture me? Because it’s my fault you died?”

The hallucination with a voice stared directly into Xiao’s eyes, pleading. “*Xiao, it’s me!*”

“Don’t haunt me.” He could hear his voice getting clearer, and a little twinge of fear shook in his heart, but he was too tired, too weak to really acknowledge it. “Please. I did everything for you. I will help you find peace if you need it, but please don’t haunt me.”

“Find peace?”

“I know how to release spirits.” Xiao blinked his eyes tightly before staring up at his Archon again. His face was getting sharper and clearer, and now Xiao was *certain* he was hallucinating. “I’ve done it for gods before.” He somehow found the energy to sit up and reached his fingers towards the forehead above him—

And Rex Lapis darted away, faster than even Xiao usually would have, *too fast for a shade to travel*, and spread his arms out, summoning a glittering golden shield that surrounded him in a column.

Xiao froze. *Shades can’t do that.*

“Xiao, I’m not dead, and I’m not a shade, but right now if you try to do that to me, you *will* actually kill me.” The archon’s voice was slow and clear, reasoning. “It’s me. I’m Rex Lapis. And I’m not dead. I faked it. I faked all of it. I’m sorry.”

“Liar.”

“*Look at me!*” Whatever this figure was took a step closer to where Xiao sat in the water. “Really, really look at me. You once said that my true followers should be able to recognize me in any form. Don’t you recognize me?” His voice dropped down to a whisper. “Look at me. Please.”

Xiao looked.

The man before him was definitely not human, but surely not a shade. He had a physical body, and he smelled like flowers and a bit like death, but not at all like a dry corpse. He was wearing a brown and amber suit and dress shoes and a tie and black gloves. He had amber eyes and long, black hair.

He took another step closer. The gold shield fell away.

There were red lines of divinity around those amber eyes. There were two silver rings on his thumbs, a thin band on the right hand and an emperor ring on the left hand. His black ponytail faded to amber at the ends. Even without radiating Geo power that could move mountains and destroy dragons, he held himself with the wisdom, authority, and power that could only come with millennia of experience.

“Rex Lapis,” Xiao breathed. “*You’re alive.*”

It should have been good news.

Xiao leaped to his feet and almost fell over from the sudden head rush and blood loss, but he managed to stay upright just by sheer emotion. His forehead felt hot. His eyes felt hot. Every part of him was burning with metaphorical fire almost more intense than any flame had ever felt on his skin.

“Why, why, why, *why, why why why why wHY WHY???*” He rushed forward, not sure if he wanted to stab Rex Lapis or hug him, finding himself grabbing the lapels of the archon and doing a sort of rough shaking motion that made Rex Lapis wince. “Do you have *any idea* what I’ve been through? Do you know what the fuck happened? *Why?* Are you fucking insane, my LORD, how could you do this?!” The questions came faster than his brain could truly handle, rage and pain rising in his throat like bile, like fire, stinging and horrible. “What happened to your power? Where have you been? *What are you wearing—?!*”

Rex Lapis threw his arms around Xiao and held him close to his chest, and all of the yaksha's thoughts just stopped.

Rex Lapis had never hugged him before.

His anger evaporated, and he blinked a couple of times into Rex Lapis's dress shirt before realizing that he was crying.

It was uncomfortable, too much and too close and not at all something that Xiao could have handled in a stronger state, but pure relief and sudden exhaustion dropped Xiao's stinging arms to his side. He allowed himself to be held, just for a moment, Rex Lapis's head resting on top of Xiao's, and Xiao's cheek pressed against his archon's heart.

"I'm sorry," Rex Lapis finally whispered. "I heard your prayers. I heard all of it. I'm so sorry."

"Then why didn't you answer?" Xiao closed his eyes, and he could feel tears rolling down the side of his face. "Why did you do this to me?"

"I needed you all to be on the same page," his god answered. "I needed everything to go according to plan. I had to make sure that everyone really and truly believed that I was gone, because if even a single person didn't react the way that all you marvelous adepti and Qixing expected, then they would have suspected something."

Xiao's face twitched. He still didn't understand.

But a part of him decided he didn't need to understand. Rex Lapis was *alive*, and had saved him for the thousandth time.

Still. "Please don't ever keep anything from me again," he mumbled. "Please. Ever. Never. *Please.*"

"Okay, okay," Rex Lapis said quietly. "I will not."

They finally pulled away from each other and sat down at the stone table, drying in the sun. Just like old times.

"Is that what you were planning the whole time?" Xiao asked, wiping his eyes with the back of his hands, still full of questions. "You were going to fake your death and force the adepti and Qixing to just figure it out?"

Rex Lapis sighed. "I was tired, and there was no way that everyone was just going to let me retire after so many years. I've lived for so long and seen so much come and go, but everyone has always just relied on me. Do you understand?"

Xiao looked away. "It didn't have to be like this, my Lord."

"I really believe that it did. I would not have done it if I didn't think it was absolutely necessary," Rex Lapis said gently. "And I'm going by Zhongli now, Xiao."

Xiao tilted his head. "Which characters?"

"钟, like 'timepiece'; 离, my pre-Archon name, like 'relativity' or 'leaving.'"

Zhongli. Like a pun for "the time of leaving," and a combination of Guizhong's name and Morax's original name.

“It suits you,” Xiao said simply. “It has a lot of layers and secrets to it. I like it.”

“I’m glad.” Zhongli smiled.

“I have more questions.”

“Ask away.”

“How come I didn’t sense you coming up the mountain? What happened to your power? I know I was...” Xiao hesitated. “I was making some hasty decisions, but I still would have recognized your power.”

“Oh.” Zhongli shrugged. “I gave away my gnosis.”

His gnosis.

The source of his archonic power and status.

His *gnosis*.

Everything that set him apart from a normal elemental being, or even a normal god.

He gave it away.

Xiao’s brain short-circuited and his jaw fell open.

“It was for the best,” Zhongli continued. “You’re definitely stronger than me now. Isn’t that interesting?”

Xiao just stared at him. “My Lord, I know that centuries ago I swore that I would never doubt you, but I am doubting you *so* much right now.”

A smile played at Zhongli’s mouth, and he looked up, trying not to laugh. “I’m actually working at Wangsheng Funeral Parlor now, and I’m having a lot of fun.”

That explained the flower smell. “Fun.”

“Yes, it’s a lot of busywork, but I get to share all of the historical knowledge and experience that I have, and everyone just believes that I’m just a very well-read mortal. It’s amazing that I can share so much knowledge, and at the same time, I can *learn* all the things I never knew I never knew!” Zhongli broke into a full grin then, tossing his head back and smiling up into the sun. “We’ve done well, Xiao. Don’t you think we deserve this time off?”

Xiao watched the light meet Zhongli in all the best ways, sending radiance through his amber eyes, illuminating the cor lapis around his neck, highlighting his tasseled bead earring, glinting on his silver rings, and shining most brightly through his smile. When was the last time he had seen Rex Lapis look so happy, being so busy and yet so relaxed?

Could this really be a good thing?

“Oh, I met Lumine,” Zhongli said casually. “Isn’t she wonderful?”

Xiao laughed, and the sound felt weird to him after all this time. “She’s definitely interesting. I don’t think I’ve interacted with her enough to deem her ‘wonderful’ or not, and I don’t really plan to do so anyway.”

“Mm?” Zhongli raised his eyebrows. “I was in the city when you were all fighting Osial, just in case anything didn’t go according to plan. I saw you catch her, even when no one in Teyvat knows better than I do how much you despise physical contact.”

“*Pft.*” Xiao looked away. “Is there anything you know about her that you want to share with me?”

“Maybe you should ask her yourself.” Zhongli grinned, just a little sneaky and secretive. “I just met up with her earlier to tell her about being Rex Lapis, and all about my gnosis and my contract with the Fatui.”

“*Your contract with the —?!?*” Xiao sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Honestly, my Lord, I say this with the utmost respect: *this plan sounds like shit.*”

“Mm. It feels good to finally come clean to you,” Zhongli continued, smiling. “I missed you. You’re so lively right now. I haven’t seen you this energetic in a long time.”

Xiao wouldn’t be ignored. “I’m lively because I have spent all my energy mourning you, but I’m excited you’re alive! Now, *are you happy with the way things turned out?* Did this all go according to your god-doesn’t-even-know-what plan?”

“Yes.” Zhongli folded his arms and leaned across the table, earnest and honest. “It was perfect. The adepti and the Qixing, and even the Millelith and the Traveler, were all able to cooperate so well. Liyue is in good hands.”

“Yours were the best hands,” Xiao muttered.

“Debatable,” Zhongli retorted instantly. “It doesn’t change the fact that I’ve been tired for centuries and ready for something new. Hu Tao is an emotional child, but she’s a fascinating boss so far.”

Xiao wrinkled his nose. “Please don’t call her boss. That’s so odd.”

“It was easy to start calling her boss, actually. The biggest learning curve for me is learning how to use Mora.”

“That’s ridiculous.” The Archon of Money, using money? Saving money? Spending? “I can’t imagine any divinities bothering to use Mora.”

“Venti does it,” Zhongli pointed out. “Mostly for alcohol, but still.”

Xiao just rolled his eyes in response, but he smiled. “I wonder how that bard is doing.”

“Oh, he lost his gnosis too.” Zhongli stood, not even waiting for Xiao’s mouth to fall open in surprise. “Do you think that you and I could meet up once a week, as friends, just to drink tea and catch up?”

“Well, are you going to be like Venti from now on?” Xiao shook his head incredulously. “Will you be able to *afford* a cup of tea?”

Zhongli scoffed. “You’re funny.”

“I wasn’t joking.” Xiao huffed a small laugh through his nose. “Yes, I can meet up once a week to have tea with you.”

“Okay, then.” Zhongli grinned at him, and the sheer goodness of him made Xiao feel lighter. “I

suppose I agree to the stipulations of this contract,” he joked.

“I also agree.” Xiao stood and busied himself with straightening the settings on the table, making them *just so* to avoid any wrath from Cloud Retainer.

“Xiao,” Zhongli said suddenly, and the yaksha looked up.

“Yes?”

The hard gold of Xiao’s eyes met Zhongli’s soft amber, both still lined in the same divine red of the centuries, even now. Even when almost everything had changed between the two.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized again, voice soft and withheld. “Even if you don’t believe me, I’m sorry for everything that I put you through. You do not have to forgive me, but I am sorry, and I hope you know you were never alone, and you never will be. I promised you that I would never leave you, and I do not break my promises.”

Xiao’s hands curled into fists, and even just that small motion strained the ache and sting of his tightly wrapped forearms. *Inhale. Exhale.* “I’m just relieved that you’re alive.”

“Don’t make this about me.” Zhongli crossed his arms high across his chest and sighed. “You... You scared me, Xiao. It’s not a sight I ever wanted to see, just... You, one of my oldest friends, floating with your eyes closed in a pool of your own blood.” He closed his eyes tightly, just for a second, before looking at Xiao again. “I *know*, I know I put you through some of the darkest of the dark moments in your life, but... Please, don’t do that again.”

Ah. Xiao ran his bare fingers lightly over the still-healing, ointment-covered, streamer-wrapped wounds in his arms, grateful for his resilient yaksha body and unstaining clothes of Guizhong’s handiwork. In a day, the evidence of his momentary lapse would disappear and fade into just another bad memory. *He saved me again, he’s saved me so many times. I will never stop owing him.* “I won’t do it again,” he answered quietly. “It was a moment of weakness, that’s all. You can go, and I’ll be okay. Really.”

“You know, Xiao, that you’re free now?” Zhongli asked gently. “You hold no contract to an archon that is no longer present, and you have no obligation to work. The fact is that now, you have the *opportunity* to start living whatever life you would like to. It isn’t as though without the contract, you have nothing to live for.”

Xiao knit his eyebrows. “I never agreed to the contract because I wanted the work, and I wasn’t trying to end my life because I needed *work*. I did it because...”

Just say it.

You regretted not saying it to so many people, now you have a second chance so just say it.

If you’re going to be his friend, be honest with him.

“... I did it because you’re the only person I still love, and I didn’t want to be without you.” Xiao cleared his throat. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d said such a strong sentiment out loud. “Thank you for everything, always, and I forgive you for lying to me, and I’m not going to die right now, even though that doesn’t mean I don’t still kind of want to throw a tantrum right now.”

Zhongli was smiling. He was definitely resisting the urge to hug the yaksha again, and Xiao whispered a silent prayer of thanks. He’d had more physical contact in the last few hours than he’d had in centuries combined. “I love you too, Xiao. Please don’t ever try to end yourself again.”

"I won't. I won't." Xiao sighed. "Did you not hear the rest of what I said? About the tantrum?"

"Did *you* hear *any* of what *I* said?" Zhongli asked. "I'm not saying you *can't* continue fighting every night. My point is that you don't *have* to. You're free. You can do whatever you want, as long as it's not self-inflicted self-detriment."

Xiao still didn't really understand. He wasn't free; he still had karmic debt and a meteor of trauma and a deeply-ingrained sense of protection for Liyue. "What else am I supposed to do?"

"Why don't you take some time to think about it?" Zhongli asked. "What else do you even have going on?"

Xiao muttered unintelligibly under his breath before meeting Zhongli's eyes again. "Where are you going now?" He asked, more quickly and clingy-sounding than he would have liked, trying to keep the undercurrent of *wait don't leave my sight again, don't leave me alone, just stay here wait* out of his voice.

Of course, Zhongli understood. He always understood.

"I won't be far from you," he assured him. "It will almost be just like before. I will be in the city, and I will come see you all the time. You'll know exactly where I am, too." He smiled. "I promised I wouldn't leave you, and I didn't break that promise, Xiao. I won't leave you alone. Do you trust me?"

"... Honestly?" Xiao wrinkled his nose. "After the days I've had, no."

Zhongli half-laughed and half-sighed, and the fondness in his eyes washed over Xiao like sunshine. "Fair enough." He smiled, knowing and sly and sideways. "But I won't leave you alone. I think your friend over there has a gift for you." He pointed over Xiao's shoulder, and Xiao turned to look.

The Traveler was walking up the bridge at the south side of the mountain, carrying a sweet-smelling box in her hand, hitching her shoulder up to accommodate for the weight of the box. As if she wasn't so strong that she defeated a Fatui Harbinger and the Overlord of the Vortex less than fifteen hours ago.

Xiao squinted. "How did she know where to find me?"

When he didn't hear an answer, he looked back at Zhongli.

Zhongli was scowling at the stone table, distracted. "Cloud Retainer really set out a bowl, a teacup, a teapot, and chopsticks for Guizhong, and set out nothing for me? Why?" He looked up when he noticed Xiao's eyes on him. "Hm? Oh. I will excuse myself to the Funeral Parlor now. Be well, Xiao. I'll see you next week."

Xiao chortled a huff through his nose. "See you next week."

He smiled as Zhongli turned and spread his glider, disappearing off the side of the mountain. He'd never seen Rex Lapis glide before. He'd never seen him be *distracted* before. He'd never seen him in a *suit* before, or bother wearing a fake glass Vision that hung off the back of his coat. Xiao knew, without needing to see, that Zhongli blended in just fine with the humans.

'It will almost be just like before,' he'd said, but Xiao knew better.

Things are different, he thought for the umpteenth time in his life. *Things are so different.*

But I'll be fine.

I'll be fine.

Chapter End Notes

my gamma thinks he was forgiven too quickly lol.

see you in two weeks ^^~ love stories are more difficult than angst.

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Alone but Not Lonely, Part 2

Chapter Summary

“Wait. Traveler.” The words came out way more aggressive and rude than he intended, and he cursed under his breath.

“Huh?” She turned back, eyes wide.

He swallowed the awkward lump in his throat. “I’m not sick, Traveler. Or, I’m not contagious. The medicine is... for something else. You can stay. If you want to.”

Wow. He cursed himself inwardly for not being used to talking to people, not being used to this kind of interaction, certain that she was going to leave for the sole purpose of avoiding his awkwardness...

“Oh, okay.” The Traveler beamed and sat down in the spot meant for Cloud Retainer. “Can I have some almond tofu?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Xiao was sitting on Rex Lapis’s stone seat at the table when the Traveler finally approached him, skipping from rock to rock to get to the island of the lake with the box still swinging in her hand. She looked mad, and he raised one eyebrow quizzically. “Hello, Traveler.”

“The bastard,” she muttered under her breath. “If I knew he was just going to come here to see you anyway, I would have told him to just *bring this stuff by himself!* He didn’t need *me* to carry the damn box.” She plopped the white paper package on the table and pointed at Xiao. “I saw him, too, so don’t try to tell me Zhongli wasn’t here.”

“He was here,” Xiao answered. “Is this all from him?”

The Traveler nodded, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand. “It’s hot, and he made me come all the way up here with that.” She wrinkled her nose as she started to open the box, still muttering under her breath. “Whatever, Zhongli, Rex Lapis, Morax, all-powerful god or whatever out here making me do his work...”

“Hey.” Xiao frowned. “What do you know about Morax?”

The Traveler’s hands stilled, and she frowned back. “What do *you* know about Morax?”

There was a short, tense moment where they just stared at each other across the table, both clearly thinking the same thing: *Do you know? Do you know?*

“Morax is my Savior,” Xiao said slowly, watching for any reaction on her face. “Don’t speak against him.”

The Traveler cocked her head to the side, and her lips slowly turned up in a smile. “You said *‘is,’*” she said. “You know. You know he’s Zhongli.”

Xiao folded his arms, suddenly defensive. “You knew? When did he tell you?”

“Yikes.” The Traveler thought for a moment. “I found out right after the battle with Osial, right after you left last night. I wasn’t technically supposed to be there, but I watched him give his gnosis to the Fatui Harbingers.”

“Ahhh, that.” Xiao blew out a sigh, oddly relieved that she hadn’t been told directly, as if her knowledge of the matter was more important than his own.

“Yeah, I don’t really know what he was doing with that either, but I guess in the end, it was his choice.” She looked down, breaking their prolonged eye contact, and finished opening the box. “He told me to bring you this medicine, and...” She blinked a couple of times, and her eyelashes tapped her cheekbones. “... and what looks like twelve servings of almond tofu.”

“Ha.” Xiao took up the metal bottle, unscrewing the cap and pouring himself a cup, sighing in relief as the bittersweet smell of zhenxinsan filled his nose. He took a sip, taking a moment to relish in the feeling of the hot liquid soothing any remaining anxiety from his mind. “Thank you for bringing it, Traveler.”

The Traveler smiled, placing a covered gold and blue china dish of shining almond tofu on the table. “I’m glad that Zhongli told you in person instead of in a dream like everyone else. You deserved it. I hope you feel better soon from your illness!” She turned to go.

Wait.

Xiao’s heart jumped in alarm, and he stood a little too quickly, bumping his hip against the side of the table. “Wait. Traveler.” The words came out way more aggressive and rude than he intended, and he cursed under his breath.

“Huh?” She turned back, eyes wide.

He swallowed the awkward lump in his throat. “I’m not sick, Traveler. Or, I’m not contagious. The medicine is... for something else. You can stay. If you want to.”

Wow. He cursed himself inwardly for not being used to talking to people, not being used to this kind of interaction, certain that she was going to leave for the sole purpose of avoiding his awkwardness...

“Oh, okay.” The Traveler beamed and sat down in the spot meant for Cloud Retainer. “Can I have some almond tofu?”

Xiao blinked. *She’s actually staying.* “Yes. Of course.”

She immediately moved to uncover the plate she’d taken out and searched through the box for a spoon. “This is Cloud Retainer’s abode, isn’t it? I came here before to speak with her, right before I met you. Is she going to be upset that I’m here? Or that I’m sitting in her seat?” She asked sincerely, though she seemed rather casual as she scooped up a bite of almond tofu.

“It’s okay,” Xiao answered, sitting back down and taking another sip from his cup. “I lived here before she did, and Rex Lapis before me. She won’t bother you if I’m with you.”

“Mm,” the Traveler nodded around the bite in her mouth. She stood again to fish through the box. The china plates clinked gently as she pulled out a second ceramic spoon and offered it, handle first, to Xiao.

Right. He gingerly took the spoon from her, careful not to make any contact with his bare fingers, wincing slightly as his streamers tugged at the still-healing cuts on his arms, and scraped off a corner of the shining white squares of pure sweetness.

Osmanthus syrup and milled almonds and sweet sugar and rich cream all came together in the pearly, silky texture of Xiao's absolute favorite food, made better by the fact that it was made by his absolute favorite being in the world. His nagging desire for dreams was satiated, at least for now, and Xiao sighed softly, feeling better than he had in weeks; he took a larger bite, and his eyes closed in contentment.

He could sense the Traveler watching him.

Shit. His eyes flew open and his eyebrows furrowed when she quickly looked down, proving his senses right. Her gaze landed on his wrapped forearms and his gloveless hands, and her head tilted in a question.

Shit, shit, shit. Xiao shook his head in a barely noticeable motion, fighting the sudden urge to hide his hands under the table. He couldn't think of anything to say. His eyes burned a single spot on the table. He'd just asked her to stay, but now he kind of wished she would leave...

"Thank you for catching me last night," she said easily, breaking the silence that had gone on a little too long. "I know I said I wouldn't need saving, so... I guess I owed you one." She smiled brightly.

He nodded in response and took another bite of almond tofu, if only to do something with his hands. The purple silk wraps tugged at his skin.

She was still watching him.

Xiao decidedly kept his eyes on the shining dessert before him. He took another sip of the zhenxinsan. He took another bite. He folded his arms. He unfolded his arms.

The Traveler's face was gently blank. "You really don't know how to get to know someone, do you?"

"Excuse me?" Xiao frowned, immediately defensive. "Who said I want to get to know you?"

"I mean..." The Traveler tilted her head to the side. Those feathers in her hair brushed her shoulder. "*You're* the one who told me I could stay. Correct me if I'm wrong, but isn't that an indication?"

He folded his arms again, shifting slightly, taking up another bite of almond tofu. She was *right*, but did she have to be so blunt? "I wouldn't know. I've never gotten to know someone before. In my life, people just kind of... show up."

Xiao frowned deeper the harder he thought about it. He'd known and loved many beings in his life. He knew many facts *about* those beings, but it all just happened over the course of centuries of experience and camaraderie. No one had ever been so direct with him, except *maybe* Venti.

"Wow." The Traveler tapped the plate with her spoon. "That makes me sad. Alright, well, you can ask me questions, and you find out more about me as we talk! We'll get to know each other." She smiled fully, bright as ever, blunt as ever, sweeping her fingers across the tabletop as she moved just a little bit closer. "So, Adeptus Xiao. Ask me a question."

There was almost an audible click in Xiao's mind as he turned to look at the Traveler, drumming

her fingers on the stone table and tucking her shining blond hair behind her ear, just under those unfamiliar white flowers.

Who are you?

How did you get here?

What are those flowers on your head?

How are you using two elemental powers without a Vision? Who taught you how to fight? What is your story?

HOW ARE YOU SO STRONG? WHO ARE YOU?

“I can’t think of anything that I want to ask you,” he lied.

“Pft.” The Traveler brought her hand up quickly to cover her face, but Xiao could see her smile in her eyes. She quickly regained her composure. “Sure. No problem. I’ll just ask you questions then. Is that okay?”

He lifted and lowered one shoulder. The almond tofu between them was almost gone. *What is she going to ask? Is she going to ask about my past? Is she going to ask about my arms? What’s going to happen? I don’t know what to expect —*

“What do you do in your free time?”

“My—?” Xiao shook his head, amazed. “How do you have the courage to ask an adeptus about hobbies?”

“Hey, you said it yourself!” The Traveler pushed back. “We both know I’m an Outlander, and I don’t know anything about the adepti. I’m not timid at all. What do you do?”

What do you do?

Nothing.

“All I do is fight.” Xiao looked down at his bare hands. His fingers were oversensitive to touch, used to being covered by the gloves and gauntlets he’d thrown aside and lost track of, overly aware of the cold surface of the stone table and the ceramic spoon in his hand. He clenched his free fist tightly; a stab of sharp karmic pain cut through the easy pressure of the silk wrapping his arm. He cleared his throat and repeated, a little louder: “All I do is fight. You should see me as a weapon and nothing more.”

He would keep doing what he had been doing for almost as long as he could remember, fighting and killing and protecting Liyue from demons, no matter how few they might be after the second sealing of Osial. This was his reason for living.

“That’s all?” The Traveler asked patiently when Xiao did not elaborate further. “You don’t have anything else?”

Xiao scowled, forgetting his karmic pain. “What do you mean, *‘that’s all?’* It’s a noble cause. I have a contract. I don’t do anything else.”

“Mmmmmmmmm...” The Traveler’s eyes flicked over to meet Xiao’s stare. She grinned, turning up just one corner of her mouth until she was almost winking. “I don’t believe you.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t get me wrong! I can feel your power. I can tell you’re strong, and I’ve experienced your speed, but there’s no way that fighting is all you want to do. There’s so many hours in a day, and so many days in a life. Why spend all that time training?” She folded her arms, straightening her spine a little at Xiao’s sharp tone, but that infernal grin still dimpled the left side of her face. “Who are you fighting to impress?”

“Alright.” Xiao stood up abruptly, slamming his spoon down onto the table more forcefully than he intended. Something like adrenaline set off in his heart, shooting energy throughout his limbs. He summoned his spear, spinning the jade pole over the back of his hand. “Fight with me, then,” he challenged. “Do you think you can stand against me?” The Traveler jolted slightly from surprise, and grim satisfaction spread a sort of permissive smirk across Xiao’s face.

His bold challenge surprised Xiao himself. He’d just recovered from near-death. His arms were nowhere near healed, and the jade spear was too cold and the carved handle too detailed against his naked palms, but in the center of his mind the daring question echoed almost audibly: *how strong are you? How strong are you, really? You, who carries no Vision and defeated both Dvalin and Osial, how strong are you?*

The Traveler narrowed her eyes back at him. In a superhuman flash, she glanced down at the wraps on his arms and a flicker of concern crossed her eyes — but she looked back up at him so quickly he wasn’t sure if it had happened at all. “Remember, adeptus. I took down Osial.”

“With help,” Xiao corrected. “You took down Osial with help.”

“Still.” The Traveler stood. Her sword, a dull blade, appeared backhanded at her right side, and she rolled her fingers over the hilt. “I’m stronger than I look. I’ll stand against you.”

Her white dress fluttered like a butterfly’s wing around her as she sank into an offensive stance, loose blonde strands of hair whipping around her face, eyes wide and innocent and yet set with fierce determination.

The odd desire to push the Traveler as she’d pushed him crept over Xiao’s skin. He couldn’t put a name to the emotion, but the delight in *pushing* and the want to be the one to test the Traveler’s strength was sweeter than the flavor of almond tofu that lingered on his tongue. “You’re wasting time,” he said simply. “Let’s go.”

Her unwavering grin deepened into a smile. She rushed at him with her sword. Blow for blow, parry for parry, stab for slash, she matched him, and he didn’t have even a moment to think about anything other than her next move.

Every emotion Xiao had felt in the last hour — pain, hurt, relief, irritation, possessiveness, jealousy, and duty — was forgotten to the air for a moment as iron and jade crashed together in a resounding *clang*. His breath came in short huffs. He could feel his hands callusing over his polearm. His heart beat faster and faster and *faster* in his chest, but not from fear or anxiety. No.

He dodged another blow from the Traveler’s shitty iron blade, and he almost laughed as he slashed his spear back up at her. Exhilaration, and even a little bit of relaxation, flooded his veins when he realized that the Traveler was laughing, too. The two of them were fully focused on pushing themselves and their opponent as far as possible.

He couldn’t consciously put a name to the feeling. He hadn’t felt it in so long. But in the deepest recesses of his tortured soul, a very small part of Xiao’s memory must have known he was having

fun.

◇ ◇ ◇

Elemental power and dual-wielding aside, Xiao was stronger than the Traveler when it came to sheer might, though they seemed to be about on the same level when it came to their skill with their weapons. When she finally tapped out, she collapsed on the sandy bank at the edge of the lake, plunging both arms into the water and sighing in relief.

“Why did I accept a challenge on the hottest day of the year?” She groaned, and for a second Xiao was positive she was going to dunk her whole head in the water. “Am I dumb?”

Xiao’s hair was stuck to the sides of his neck. His skin was itchy and hot under his bandages, and he folded his arms where he stood. “You’re not dumb. My spear is just much better than your terrible sword.”

The Traveler hummed, swirling her arms in the lake. “My sword does suck. And your spear is *beautiful*.”

“Tch.” The irritated sound escaped Xiao before he knew it would; he cringed at himself, hoping the Traveler hadn’t heard him. “Don’t compliment the thing that is attacking you.”

“*It’s* not attacking me, *you* are. And I didn’t say *you* were beautiful,” the Traveler pouted.

Ah. A chill swept over Xiao. He shivered, even under the burning afternoon sun, and a strong urge to change the subject overcame any remaining awkwardness he might have felt. “Traveler,” he asked without meeting her eyes. “You don’t have a Vision. Would you tell me where your power comes from?”

She shrugged. “You can ask, but I literally have no idea.”

Xiao turned his head to stare at her.

“What?” She frowned back at him. “Literally no idea.”

How could that be? Why wouldn’t she know? *How was she so powerful?* “You can’t possibly be human,” he murmured thoughtfully.

The Traveler blinked, staring down at her hands. “Really? I can’t? She looked genuinely confused, and she stiffened under his judgmental look. “I don’t know. What is being a human supposed to feel like?”

“Why would I know that?” Xiao scoffed.

“Well, what are you?”

“No one has told you?”

“Uhhh...” The Traveler withdrew her arms from the water, shaking the excess drops off of her skin. “You’re supposedly the Conqueror of Demons, but I’ve met an exorcist in Liyue Harbor who is arguably also a conqueror of demons, and I don’t really know what exactly an adeptus is, so... No. No one has told me what you are.”

Xiao blew out a sigh, ruffling the hair that had fallen into his eyes. “I am a yaksha.”

“Cool. I don’t know what that means.” The Traveler shifted until she sat on the bank of the river

with her legs crossed, looking expectantly up at Xiao like a child waiting for a story.

He was instantly guarded. He stood a little straighter and folded his itching arms a little more securely. “Yakshas are immortal and powerful deities. I am far from human.” He could hear the detachment in his own voice. “I can’t make much of human emotions.”

The Traveler rested her chin on her hand. The undivided attention in her eyes made Xiao itch more. “I’m sure you have emotions.”

“Of course I have emotions. I just don’t understand the humans’ insincerity, or their attachment to things, or their desire to change.” He sighed quietly. “Or their need to ask the deities for things while also weirdly pitying me.” His eyes twitched in irritation as he remembered the humans that would flock to this exact mountain, having read all the horrible things that happened to the yakshas and adepts while still demanding answers to their wishes.

“I don’t weirdly pity you,” The Traveler commented. “Does that make me inhuman?”

Xiao rolled his eyes. “You don’t know enough about me.”

She reached over and picked up his gauntlet off the ground where he’d thrown it that morning, turning it over until she found the glass square hanging around it. “You have a Vision, so that means you have desires, right?”

“Visions? Desires?” Xiao shook his head. Annoyance crept up his throat. He’d experienced the emotions of humans through their dreams, and he’d never felt that level of selfish want in his own life. Karmic pain prickled his skin, and he impatiently shook his head again. “Have some respect. I know what human ambitions and desires feel like, but it’s ridiculous to think I could have those.”

He was tempted to think that she was judging him according to her humanity or mortality, but really — as sweet and clean as this girl splashing her fingers in the lake and casually holding his Vision in her hand was, he’d seen and felt her power. There was definitely more to her than he could imagine, even if he couldn’t figure out what that was yet.

The oddest thing was that he wanted to be the one to find out.

“All beings have desires, whether they know it or not. Maybe you’re not human, but is there anything you want?” The Traveler smiled sideways, and mischief glinted off her teeth. “What are you hiding?”

What do I want?

“I’m not hiding anything,” he answered. Xiao leaned down to take the gauntlets from her hands and laid them on the stone table. As long as his arms were still healing, he wouldn’t be able to put them on. He ran his thumb over the cool glass surface of his Vision before turning back to the Traveler. “I just don’t have desires in your probably-mortal understanding of the word, Outlander.”

“Lumine,” she corrected immediately. “You can call me Lumine.”

“Mm.”

The sun was starting to set over the west side of the mountain. The Traveler looked out at the sunset and made a happy sound at the view of golden-pink clouds and lavender sky, but anxiety burned behind Xiao’s eyes. The night was coming, and Osial might have been sealed, but the demons of Liyue were still his responsibility. Even though Zhongli had technically released him from his contract, he couldn’t just *not* defend Liyue.

An explosion of karmic pain sliced into him just then, a deep-cutting ache that rippled his skin from his toes to his shoulders and burned the cuts on his arms. “Ow,” he gasped quietly, inhaling and exhaling and bowing his head and curling his hands into fists as he prayed for the wave to pass. “*Fuck.*”

“Xiao?” The Traveler stood up, concern warping her features. “Xiao, are you okay?”

The pain subsided as quickly as it came, but words were thorns in Xiao’s throat. He reached over to grab the long-cold thermos of zhenxinsan on the table and downed the rest of it in a few swallows, relishing in the gentle numbing that trickled through his nerves. “Mm-hm.”

The Traveler opened her mouth as if to say something, but she closed it again and looked away.

He’d already forgotten what he was thinking about. “It’s night, Traveler. When the darkness comes, you should go inside.”

Her eyebrows were deeply furrowed. “Why?” She stood up and brushed the sand from her dress. “Do you think I’ll get hurt or in trouble?”

“No,” Xiao answered honestly. “But there are things still unseen by you, and it’s best that you don’t stay outside.”

“Oh... Well, okay.” She held up a hand in a small wave. “I had a good day, Xiao. Thanks for sparring with me. And talking to me. I hope I see you around.”

“Sure.” He’d experienced all kinds of emotions today, but it was true that he had not had a terrible time with the Traveler. “Be safe. Good night, Traveler.”

“*Lumine,*” she insisted again, even as she hopped from the island towards the edge of the peak, glider half-pulled across her shoulders. “Please. My name is Lumine.”

Xiao half-smiled. Rex Lapis was alive. Rex Lapis had saved him again, and he’d lived to spend an afternoon with the most intriguing being he’d ever met. Tonight might be the easiest night of demon slaying in his life. Despite his pain, there was a lot he could think of to be grateful for, and his mood was better than it had been in years. “Alright,” he said. “Good night, *Lumine.*”

She smiled again before disappearing into a graceful glide off the side of the mountain, and Xiao watched her go. Maybe he’d never see the Traveler again. Maybe she’d disappear or leave or forget him. But he was still standing, not falling apart as he was left alone for the first time since that horrible morning. At least for now, that was enough for him.

Xiao closed his eyes. He exhaled softly, warm and at peace.

Chapter End Notes

ugh i'm not a fluff writer

did you all see that update leak??? :D i'm losing my mind oof but IM EXCITED FOR MORE YAKSHA CONTENT. BLESS

Side note, if you're ao3 user AWholeLoadofNothing, I hope you're doing well <3

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不好意思

Chapter Summary

Xiao couldn't do small talk, not even with Ganyu. He didn't know how to act. He kept his face neutral even as he quietly wished his Anemo power could clear the air. "If you have a request, make it."

His voice came out a lot harsher than he intended.

Ganyu flinched, but she steeled herself. "Well..." She cleared her throat and bowed her head respectfully. "Please train me to reclaim my adeptus side."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Other than Zhongli, Xiao didn't really see anyone else for a week or so, which was fine and within his expectations. Liyue might have been changing, but Xiao would not. His wounds healed over, he defended the land by night, and he carried on with watching the world go by. The demons continued to decrease in number. Xiao spent less time fighting and more time being still. It wasn't particularly nice, but it wasn't particularly painful either. At worst, it was a little boring, but he was not one to complain about that.

Then in a wild turn of events, Ganyu came to visit him at the Wangshu Inn.

She was just standing at the balcony of the roof, looking out at the when he returned one morning, and the only reason he didn't sense her sooner was because her shy, human awkwardness was much louder than her Cryo qilin energy.

不好意思, or *bu hao yisi*, was the Liyuen word for awkward, cringing, uneasy shyness that came with asking for a favor or receiving an undeserved gift. In some ways, it was stronger than fear or hate, only for the crippling self-awareness and discomfort.

And Ganyu reeked of it.

"Ganyu," he said, and she jumped away from the railing, turning to face him.

He hadn't actually had the opportunity to really look at her in the few times that they'd seen each other during the adepti meetings and battle on the Jade Chamber, but now he had nothing else to distract him from her. She hadn't changed much in the years. She was a little taller, her blue hair a little longer, and her face had become thinner, but her purple and gold eyes were just as he remembered them. She also had a plate of almond tofu in her hand.

"Xiao!" She exclaimed, smiling shyly. "It's good to see a familiar face. How are you? I brought this for you." She held the almond tofu out to him.

He accepted it. He could never turn down almond tofu. "You didn't have to do that, but thank you." He took a bite of it, and the smallest hint of disappointment flickered across his face — as delicious as it was, he could tell that it had been made by Verr Goldet and bought from the inn. "It's good to see you too."

Ganyu looked down at her feet, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. The sense of *bu hao yisi* increased, and the air between them stretched and contracted with it. She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

Xiao couldn't do small talk, not even with Ganyu. He didn't know how to act. He kept his face neutral even as he quietly wished his Anemo power could clear the air. "If you have a request, make it."

His voice came out a lot harsher than he intended.

Ganyu flinched, but she steeled herself. "Well..." She cleared her throat and bowed her head respectfully. "Please train me to reclaim my adeptus side."

He blinked. "What do you mean?"

"Ah... After the battle with Osial and the final separation between the adepti and the humans, I felt more homesick and unwelcome than ever in the city." She put her hands together in front of her face, but she couldn't hide her hurt expression. "The Qixing have given me the opportunity to leave my position in Liyue Harbor with dignity, and... I want to be an adeptus again. Please, will you train me?"

Xiao could remember the panic attack that she'd had on her first week of working in the city, the first day that anyone had prayed directly to him. From what he had heard and what he had sensed, she had more or less totally left adeptushood behind in favor of her humanity and extremely busy schedule. It didn't really make sense for the Qixing to ask her to leave after all that she had sacrificed.

Humans. He sighed. "Why do you think that I am the right person to train you?"

"Well." Ganyu shifted again, and her face turned pink. "I had asked you a long time ago, but... You referred me to someone else who is no longer with us. Now you're the strongest of the adepti, or of the Liyuen deities, and I really believe you are the only one who can challenge me enough to reach my true potential."

True potential was a very mortal, very human ideal. The Ganyu he had known during the Archon War had not been this vulnerable.

He sighed slightly, subtle enough that Ganyu wouldn't notice. "Are you out of touch with combat?"

"I don't usually have the time to train," Ganyu answered, "but I can still accurately shoot, and my elemental power is very strong and does not require much effort on my part. I would still like to hone these abilities."

Xiao closed his eyes, thinking of Antheas and offering a quiet prayer to whatever may have remained of her consciousness. *She would have done a better job. I hope I do right by her.*

"Okay," he said out loud. "I will train you, but I'm warning you now, I've never taught anyone before." He opened his eyes to look at her. "It'll probably be tough. I don't know any other way to train someone."

Relief flooded Ganyu's face, and she smiled jubilantly, finally releasing her awkwardness. "Thank you!! I will do my best! I know I'm not the same as I was a hundred years ago, but I will keep up with you, even after all this time."

Xiao almost smiled. “We’re the same age. Time passing doesn’t really mean anything.”

Ganyu laughed. “Do you think you’re getting old?”

“You’re older than me,” Xiao answered pointedly.

“We can’t confirm that for sure, so we’ll never really know.” She smiled again. “I’m almost glad that you’re a strict teacher. I really expected nothing else from you.”

“Alright. We start tomorrow, then.” He huffed softly when Ganyu nodded enthusiastically. “Meet me at Nantianmen tomorrow morning at eight, and we can begin.”

“Yes, *shifu*,” Ganyu responded quickly, her eyes shining. “I will be there! See you then.”

Xiao hummed, watching through narrowed eyes as Ganyu left the inn in the direction of Minlin. There was a ley line crack in Nantianmen that he could tap with a monolith and use to attract various mobs. He personally avoided Nantianmen, just because he hated Pyro whopperflowers, but he could attract Pyro whopperflowers and maybe some slimes for Ganyu to practice with, especially if he stayed far away, and maybe combine his Anemo power with Hydro to make it rain...

His thoughts raced as he planned, and an almost excited sort of half-smile appeared on his face.

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The following morning was crisp and clear, with gentle beams of morning sunshine chasing away the earliest hints of mist.

It was long past eight.

Xiao tapped his fingers restlessly against his mask at his side, trying not to worry but still worrying. The last time that Ganyu had gone missing, it hadn’t even been a problem! It had just been another example of how he would get stuck in his own head, thinking of the worst possible case scenarios and having these kinds of spiraling thoughts.

Inhale, slowly.

His thoughts turned from Ganyu to himself.

What if he had scared her yesterday? He’d been particularly unapproachable and cold, especially when they first started talking. He really didn’t know how to act around her. He could pretend nothing had happened and treat her like a stranger, or he could talk with her about the past and just deal with the awkwardness, or they could continue this sort-of friends sort-of not friends forever, because if she was going to return to being an adeptus and return to Minlin then *maybe she would have the time to—*

His shoulders stiffened as the Traveler, Ganyu and Paimon dropped from Mount Aocang behind him, running across the grass and yellow brush to meet him. His thoughts stopped spiraling, but he pressed his lips together. Why were they all here?

He crossed his arms and looked at Ganyu from the side of his eye as the three of them approached him and caught their breath. “You’re half an hour late. You’re never late. Is that something you picked up from the humans?”

“I’m sorry,” Ganyu apologized earnestly. “I had a meeting with Cloud Retainer, and then Lumine

came to find me and we were talking...”

The Traveler smiled sideways, easy and bold. “There’s been a huge misunderstanding, but no one ever listens to me, so now I’m tagging along with the adeptus training.” She waved. “Hi, Xiao.”

“*Lumine*,” Ganyu hissed out of the corner of her mouth.

He held up a hand. “You don’t have to explain yourself to me. I’m here to help you train. That’s all.”

Paimon pouted and muttered under her breath. “Xiao is so strict.”

Xiao pressed on. He’d forgotten how annoying the little pink fairy was. “I can’t imagine how difficult it is to be half-adeptus and half-human. It’s confusing for you to be stuck in the middle, Ganyu, but you need to face yourself. You don’t need to explain anything to me, since my experience and opinion don’t matter.”

Ganyu took a deep breath. “I don’t have anything to hide.”

That set off a whole other train of thought. *What is she thinking? What did she tell already?*

Xiao shook his head slightly. *This isn’t about me.* “If you’re ready for your trial, you can activate the ley line monolith over there.” He gestured, and Ganyu turned to look at the glowing blue pillar he had set up a good distance away. Her hands flew to twist the cords around her Vision in a very familiar habit. He could feel her rising stress and anxiety at the prospect of fighting alone, and he frowned. “Your body and your mind are one. If something worries you mentally, your physical state can help improve the situation. The trial I prepared is meant to help you explore the true potential of your body, so just do your best. The Traveler can help you if needed.”

Ganyu’s lips curved on one side in a slight smile, and she nodded. Xiao could feel her calming as she prepared herself for the trial.

Beside her, the Traveler burst out laughing.

Xiao blinked in surprise.

Ganyu sighed. “What is it?”

“Hehe.” The Traveler, still laughing, threw an arm over Ganyu’s shoulder and pulled her closer to whisper suggestively in her ear. “Ganyu, *I’ll* help you explore the true potential of your body.”

Xiao, being a yaksha, had heard her as clear as day.

Oh. My. Archons. He buried his face in his hands.

Ganyu blushed from the top of her head to her neck. “*Why would you...??*” she sighed again, pushing the still-laughing Traveler away from her. She turned and walked with purpose towards the ley line monolith. “Just come on.”

Paimon trailed after her. “What?” she shouted at Ganyu’s back. “What did she say to you?”

The Traveler grinned at Xiao, who refused to smile back. “Ganyu doesn’t have friends she can joke with, so I joke with her. I promise I don’t really mean anything by it.”

Xiao let his hands drop and looked warily out at the Traveler, just slightly exasperated. “Why don’t you focus on the trial? We’re not here to chat.”

“Alright.” She skipped off towards the monolith. Ganyu had already activated it — Paimon had shrieked unintelligibly at the sudden rainstorm — but the Traveler fell almost effortlessly into the battle.

Even from this distance, he could see bright flashes of crystal white Cryo and turquoise Anemo mixing and reacting with rain as well as the Pyro and Electro of the whopperflowers and slimes that responded to the ley line. He took note of Ganyu’s immense Cryo power and potential for growth; she could summon Cryo flowers that drew the attention of her opponents, or a large Cryo pearl that rained down ice on the whopperflowers. Ganyu’s aim was true, but there was something about the mostly-stationary combat skill of an archer that would just never quite be as brutal or as impressively beautiful as a swordsman or a polearm.

Regardless, Xiao didn’t need to be impressed. Really, in his mind, it was enough that they were willing to fight his least favorite mob.

At that moment, the Traveler spun in the air and created a whirlwind that sucked up the Hydro rain as well as at least four whopperflowers at once, destroying them in seconds and sucking the ashes of their essence down with them.

Xiao raised his eyebrows. *Interesting.*

Maybe ten minutes later, the last whopperflower had been wiped out. The rain ceased, and the Traveler and Ganyu were both blow-dried by Anemo when they returned to him.

“I completed the trial,” Ganyu stated simply, eyes cast down, like she wasn’t sure whether or not she should be proud or afraid of how Xiao would judge her.

He frowned. *I don’t like that.* “You don’t need my validation. Only you would really know how well you did. You would progress faster that way. Seeking other people’s validation won’t help you be a better adeptus.”

“Oh...” Ganyu nodded tightly. “Okay.”

“Agh,” Paimon mumbled, scratching her little head. “He’s so strict.”

The Traveler hummed and patted Ganyu’s shoulder, speaking lowly even though she must have known that Xiao would still hear. “I know what he means, though he could probably say it in a nicer way. Just do your best and let that be enough, Ganyu.”

He ignored her. “Tomorrow, I will start increasing the difficulty of your trials, just in the frequency of opponents before introducing new opponents. To prepare, you have to—”

He stopped short.

A human, wishing and praying, had seen them across the Nantianmen plain and must have recognized them as adepts. Xiao could see him now, sprinting across the grass towards them at full speed.

“Ugh.” He couldn’t hold back a groan of frustration. Ganyu, the Traveler, and Paimon all turned to look as the human slowed to walk and stood a “respectful” distance away. Xiao looked over at Ganyu, hoping she would understand, but he only saw confusion on her face.

It’s fine. “Ganyu, the next part of your training is to handle humans like that guy, who is trying to get a wish answered. Keep those kinds of humans away from me.”

Ganyu blinked, confused, but a look of understanding crossed the Traveler's face. "We've got it, right, Ganyu?" she asked, linking her arm in Ganyu's and marching off in the direction of the human.

"Oh. Yes, of course."

Paimon snickered. "Xiao can handle any battle, but he can't talk to humans, huh?"

The Traveler poked the fairy sharply, even as Xiao scowled. "Shut the hell up, Paimon. No one asked you!"

The three of them went to address the human. Xiao tuned out.

He maybe should have been focusing on how he could coach Ganyu to improve, but he couldn't stop the questions he had about the Traveler. Where did she meet this fairy? Why was she here? He had known the Traveler for a few weeks now, but he was no closer to answers than anyone else.

It was nice to know that the Traveler and Paimon were not entirely exclusive. He knew that if he wanted to, he could speak to the Traveler without the fairy present.

He startled himself with this thought. *Why does that matter?*

It was a welcome distraction when he opened his eyes to see the human sprinting off in the direction he came from, meaning that the Traveler and Ganyu had succeeded in deterring him. Good. He could hear them talking, and maybe he shouldn't have, but he listened.

"Ganyu, don't let him discourage you."

"He couldn't see me as an adeptus," Ganyu murmured. "He couldn't understand why I talked like a normal Liyuen."

Fucking humans. Xiao rolled his eyes.

"You are a Liyuen. He's just stupid. He doesn't know any better."

"Yes, but... I think he was right. I think that I..."

Silence.

"... You're better off with the humans in Liyue Harbor, huh?"

"But I'm *unwelcome* in Liyue Harbor!" Ganyu sighed, sounding a little close to tears. "As an adeptus, I wo—"

"*Ganyu.* I told you, it's a misunderstanding! Come with us to the city, and I'll prove it. I know you think I'm just a human or whatever, but can you not trust me just this once?" The Traveler's voice was firm.

Hm. Xiao knit his eyebrows.

"... Alright." Ganyu sighed again. "I'll go with you, but I still think I'm right."

"Yay!" Paimon shrieked. Xiao winced and tried to tune back out, but even without extending his senses he could hear the fairy yelling from over the brush. "Let's go!"

They walked off in the direction of the city.

They didn't say goodbye.

Silence.

...

If spiraling thoughts of anxiety were one horrible mental state, this emptiness might actually, *actually* be worse.

Xiao felt stupid and used all of a sudden. All the anticipation he had felt the day before while setting up this trial dissipated, and any fascination that had lingered with his observations from watching Ganyu and the Traveler fight just vaporized all at once like the remains of the Pyro whopperflowers. Instead, he just cringed.

What was he doing here? *What had been the point of all that?*

He teleported to Wangshu Inn, squashing down the embarrassed *bu hao yisi* building and threatening to spill over in his chest.

◇ ◇ ◇

The Traveler showed up alone at Wangshu Inn the next morning, long after Xiao had spiraled in his own insecurity for an entire night and nearly relapsed into eating a dream just to escape the uneasy self-aware belief that nothing he did mattered and meant anything to anyone, only finally feeling a little better after some almond tofu and the sunrise at Mount Aocang. When the Traveler found him, he was sitting on the sun-warmed green shingles of the roof with his legs crossed and eyes closed.

“Hey,” she called up to him. “Are you okay?”

I'm pretty sick of that question. “Mm.”

“Can I come up?”

Xiao didn't answer.

The Traveler must have taken that as an affirmation, because a moment later she had summoned and climbed on a fat Geo construct and pulled herself up onto the roof beside him, arranging her skirt around her. Xiao couldn't even find it in him to be surprised at the barrel-like Geo meteorite that appeared on his balcony. They sat in silence for a minute.

“So...” she finally started. “Ganyu thought that since the Qixing had given some other secretaries some of her work, she was being fired. I guess that triggered a whole existential crisis in her. But don't think that she doesn't appreciate the chance to become an adeptus again, or anything like that.”

Ganyu, ever the overthinker. *Some things never change.*

“Sorry we didn't say anything to you,” the Traveler said quickly, glancing at Xiao sideways. “She was kind of having a very quiet meltdown, and I just wanted to get the whole situation cleared up as soon as possible. I didn't mean to just leave you behind.”

He just nodded.

“Well, once we cleared that up, she decided to stay in the city, even though she did tell me to hit

her up for an adventure sometime if she was ever done with work.”

Xiao scoffed, and just a hint of bitterness leaked out. “When is she ever done with work?”

“Yeah, exactly!” The Traveler laughed as if she didn’t notice the aggression in his words. “It’s okay. I appreciate the thought. She works hard, and she’s an amazing secretary. She made me sign a non-disclosure agreement about her horns.” She turned to look at Xiao directly, eyes wide. “Did you know she tells the Liyuens in the city that her horns are a headpiece and not really attached to her actual skull? Can you believe anyone in the city falls for that?”

Xiao smiled ruefully. “They haven’t realized that Zhongli looks just like the Statues of Morax, so I wouldn’t give them that much credit.”

“Dang. I didn’t even think of that.” She leaned back, pressing her hands against the roof shingles, and turned to look at Xiao. “Are you mad?” She asked softly. “Things turned out okay, but I’m still really sorry we just left you like that. It was dumb, and we weren’t thinking.”

He sighed. He could understand the need to clear up a misunderstanding without wasting time, and he could understand how the Traveler would prioritize the immediate mental state of a friend, *especially* when the friend in question was Ganyu. “It’s okay. I appreciate you letting me know.”

“Of course!” The Traveler pulled her knees towards herself, folding her arms and laying her head on her hand, looking at Xiao through the strands of blond hair that fell over her eyes.

Xiao looked pointedly forward. He’d interacted with the Traveler enough at this point to know that she wasn’t afraid to speak her mind.

“Xiao,” she said, and she said his name so carefully that it was almost suspicious. “I want you to know that I’m always down to team up with you, or fight alongside you, or go on any kind of adventure with you.”

He frowned, a little annoyed that the anxiety that he’d only just managed to quench was already beginning to bubble back up. “Where is this sentiment coming from?”

Her single visible yellow eye blinked at him.

She straightened up, shaking her hair back. “Uhhh... You know how you said that I don’t know much about you? So on the walk back I asked Ganyu what she thought about you...”

“And?” His throat constricted.

“Well...” she swallowed. “She told me that she wasn’t about to try and get close to you, since...” She tapped her fingers on her knee, like she was steeling herself. “Since everyone that was close to you is no longer with us?”

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Somehow, hearing that was worse than being left behind at Nantianmen.

Every fear he’d ever had, every anxiety about how other people saw him and pitied him, all manifested in a whirlwind of thought. The only thing he pictured before his unseeing eyes was the

whipping current of the Traveler's Anemo power, tearing his mind to shreds.

It's true. It's true. It's all true. I am worthless, useless, inferior trash, and everyone around me dies, everyone around me dies or goes away or forget and why would she say that about me? WHY WOULD SHE SAY THAT ABOUT ME??

There wasn't enough air, there wasn't enough space, there wasn't any—

“Hey.” The Traveler snapped her fingers in front of his face. “Xiao. Answer me. Where are you right now?”

“I don't...” He didn't realize he was basically panting until he sucked in a conscious breath. “I don't know...” *I don't know what I did to her! I don't know why she would say this!*

Just about anyone else could have said it. Any human could have said it, any other adeptus could have said it, anyone could have said horrible things and made him feel like this or put him down or despised him secretly in their hearts. It could have been anyone. But they would never be someone that he had loved, or someone he had thought would always see him as more than he was.

His hand found his hair, twisting and pulling as visions of wrenching his brains and thoughts out through his skull blurred in front of his eyes.

She knows so many of my insecurities and she would say this behind my back, why, why, WHY—

“Xiao.” The Traveler reached her hand out but didn't touch him, probably because when she'd tried to check on him before he'd pushed her away from him, because apparently that's what he did to everyone who came into his life. He looked away, but her face followed his line of vision.

“Come on. Focus, and breathe. Look around. What do you see?”

This, at least, was a little more familiar.

Inhale.

“I see ginkgo leaves, and a yellow butterfly, and a flower pot with a rock in it for some reason,” the Traveler continued, quiet but firm. “I hear birds chirping, leaves rustling, and your heartbeat, but it's okay. It's okay.”

Exhale.

A few seconds passed, and Xiao's eyes refocused on the Traveler's face. He swallowed hard, cursing mentally at himself for showing weakness. “Thanks,” he said as evenly as he could manage.

“I don't know exactly what happened just now, but you're clearly not okay,” she responded, straightforward as ever. “Is it about Ganyu?”

Xiao winced. “It's nothing.” *It's not nothing. She confirmed my worst fears.*

“You literally stopped breathing,” the Traveler remarked.

She had a point, but far be it from Xiao to be the one to acknowledge her. “Yes, but I am fine.”

“Alright, nope.” The Traveler pinched the very tip of Xiao's sleeve in her fingers and stood up, tugging gently. “You know what?”

“I—?!” He followed her to stand, more out of confusion and abrupt surprise at her audacity than

anything else. “What?”

She pulled him towards the edge of the roof, where they walked slowly but awkwardly down the slope of the shingles onto the balcony. “I’m not about to just sit here and watch you overthink and panic. Come with me to the city and just *talk to her*. At least say goodbye, for god’s sake.”

“No, no, no. Don’t touch me.” *I will not be led like a disobedient animal*. He snatched his sleeve from her grasp and came to a standstill. “I am fine. Didn’t you just come back from the city, anyway? You don’t have to bother going back and forth like this. It’s a long walk, and I don’t need your intervention. I’m *fine*.”

“Liar,” the Traveler declared. “Don’t be dumb, Xiao. I know you’re special because you can teleport long distances, but you know what? So can I.”

No way. Xiao’s mind blanked. She had to be lying. “What.”

“What?”

“You...” He shook his head. “You can teleport?”

The Traveler rolled her eyes all the way up into her head, and Xiao was too dumbstruck to even be indignant at her unabashed lack of respect. “Come *on*. You all need a little bit of closure.” She tilted her head, and she didn’t smile, but a twinkle of artifice leaped into her eye. “I’ll teleport with you to prove it. You can at least come with me to the city and see if Ganyu will talk to you. Okay?”

He still didn’t fully believe her, but he had to see it. There was no good reason to trust her, but still he had to know for himself.

It was insane how often the Traveler was just able to shock him out of anxiety or fear just by being her ludicrous, contradictory, impossible self, standing there with her neutral expression and glowing fireworks in her eyes.

How could he say no?

“Fine.”

She smiled, satisfied. “First, you have to rub your belly and pat your head.”

Xiao stared at her, deadpan.

“Alright, I was kidding, but it would have been funny.”

With that, they whirled away.

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The Traveler called them waypoints. Xiao had never called them anything. These dusty pillars had been scattered across Liyue since before Xiao was born, and now the Traveler just happened to use them to teleport, just a flash of clouds and a feeling of pressure, not unlike what Xiao felt when he teleported, but more stable.

He just about forgot why they had come to the city at all.

“How did you know that they would even do that? How do you even activate it?” The standing waypoint in Liyue Harbor, which had long been dusty and gray, was now blue, gold, glowing, and *floating*.

“I like how people here keep asking me the whys and hows, as if I know anything about this land,” the Traveler sighed. She turned and started walking towards Yuehai Pavilion without looking to see if Xiao was following. “I know it’s not a satisfactory answer, but I just do what feels right, and I can go from anywhere in Teyvat to any waypoint I’ve touched. If it makes you feel better, I’m not as good a teleporter as you are.”

Xiao followed her, dully unobservant. A week ago, he would have thought that no one had known the natural land of Liyue better than he had, and now, here was the Traveler. Rex Lapis had said months ago that she was turning Teyvat upside down. Xiao hadn’t taken him too seriously at the time, since he was decidedly still upright on his feet on the land — but the Traveler had *definitely* turned Xiao’s brain upside down, and maybe inside out and backwards, a couple of times over in just the few weeks that he had known her. The magnitude of what Xiao didn’t know, or even *didn’t know that he didn’t know*, expanded from his head like a cloud, and he felt very small.

What in Teyvat.

“Here we are,” she announced, snapping him out of his thoughts. “Ganyu is over there. *Ganyu!*”

Wait.

The cloud of wonder dissipated like morning mist and Xiao was immediately crushed by the weight of self-aware awkwardness, *bu hao yisi* seeping into every pore in his body. He could feel a wince tugging on the nerves in his right eye. “Ah, Traveler—”

Too late.

Ganyu had been deep in conversation with a few haggard-looking women that were holding far too many papers for humans of their stature, but she cast a cursory glance over her shoulder before doing a visible double take at the sight of Xiao. “Oh!” She exclaimed before turning back to the assistants behind her, rattling off some government jargon and placing more papers on top of their piles.

“She looks busy,” Xiao murmured. “It’s f—”

“Xiao, if you say it’s fine, I’m going to jump right into the harbor here in front of everyone, and all the attention will be on us, and I’ll bet my sword that you’d hate that more than just about anything,” the Traveler said lightly. “Just give her a second.”

“You—” he stopped. He didn’t know how he had planned to end that statement. “Your sword is worth nothing,” he finished lamely.

“Ya, I’ve never heard *that* one before.” She rolled her eyes. “One second.”

A few moments later, Ganyu was walking towards them, smiling just a little too brightly, one hand up in greeting, almost dripping with a shattered glass aura of *bu hao yisi*, one wrong move meaning death by impalement. “Good morning, Lumine, Xiao, to what do I owe the pleasure? Ha...”

The Traveler scrunched up her face like she was in physical pain, and Xiao fought the urge to mirror her. “Xiao has a question for you, Ganyu.” She pressed her palms against Ganyu’s shoulders, gently pushing her towards a corridor that overlooked a pond at the side of the pavilion. “*Go on,*” she whispered loudly to Xiao. “I’ll be right over here.”

It was awkward, uncomfortable, *bu hao yisi* personified, wriggling unpleasant texture in Xiao’s consciousness. He decided right then and there that karmic pain wasn’t so bad, not compared to this. He almost wished for the pain to just put him out of his misery as Ganyu turned to look at him

and turned back before facing him again and lacing her fingers together before pulling them apart again, smile looking more like a grimace.

“So—” they said at the same time. Xiao sighed and closed his eyes, almost breathing a prayer to Rex Lapis before remembering that his archon couldn’t save him from this.

Behind the awkwardness, then, scraping at the edges of Xiao's unwillingness to speak, surged the fear that everything Ganyu had said to the Traveler was true.

“I’m sorry I—” Ganyu started—

“Why did you tell the Traveler that everyone who used to be with me is gone?” he asked quietly, words hissing out in a flat breath, emotionless because he knew, he knew that if he allowed himself to get emotional he wouldn’t be able to continue this conversation. “Do you believe in the things you told her? Do I make everyone go away?” *Do you think that I am the reason that they are gone?*

Ganyu's eyes flew wide open. "What? No, of course not!"

Xiao's gaze hardened. "Then why did you say it?" The words were more desperate-sounding than he intended. "Ganyu, *please*, tell me it's not true." *Tell me you don't think that I'm everything that I'm afraid I am.* "If you don't believe it, why did you say it?"

Stronger than Xiao's intensity was Ganyu's uneasiness. Her eyes darted from side to side and her hands, clenched into fists, still picked incessantly at her Vision cords. "I just... I was..."

Blood roared in his ears above the silence, a steady thrumming rhythm, *why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why, why*—

Ganyu blew out a long, deep breath, and the tension in the air subsided marginally. “Xiao, you’re right about me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, I’ve picked up a lot of human traits after so long in the city,” she said. “I don’t remember how to set myself apart from them anymore, even though I know I’ll never truly be one of them. So what I say now, I don’t expect you to fully understand, but please, remember that there’s a definite difference between us, and this is what made sense to me at the time.” She looked up at him, still awkward and a little tense, but calmer and sure of herself.

“Alright...” Xiao nodded. “I’m listening.”

Ganyu snuck a glance at the Traveler before looking back at Xiao. “Lumine asked me, word for word, ‘So, how do you feel about Xiao?’ I know that to you, a divine adeptus, this likely sounds like a very normal question about what I know about you, but you have to understand the very human nuance behind a question like this. She wasn’t just asking me about you. She was asking if there was anything between us.”

Oh. Xiao sighed.

“Yes.” Ganyu sighed, too, but a fond little smile hung on the edge of her lips. “And... Honestly, Xiao, I’m just too human at this point.” She fanned her face, searching for the right words. “As a girl, I felt like I had to convince her there wasn’t anything left between us. Right?”

Xiao pulled his lip between his teeth, fighting through the clustered lump in his throat. “Yes. I

know where we stand. But I don't understand why..?"

"I don't have friends here, Xiao," Ganyu interrupted with a surge of newfound energy. "I haven't talked to anyone about my emotions, or my feelings, in what feels like and very well could be centuries. No one has asked me how I *feel* about anything in ages. So when Lumine asked me, I just..." she shrugged helplessly. "... Word vomited? Verbally diarrhead?"

Xiao wrinkled his nose, but Ganyu blazed on.

"I don't know what to say, and I can't stop talking, and all these feelings and thoughts just rushed out with the sole purpose of convincing her that I don't feel that way about you anymore, and it was too much, and I *knew* it was too much, but..." She gestured again, listless. "I'm sorry, Xiao, I'm so sorry, of course I don't feel that way about you. If there's anyone other than Rex Lapis left in Liyue who knows even just a *fraction* of what you've been through, it's me! Believe me, I didn't mean to pick at your pain like that, but can you understand..?" Her voice dropped to a whisper. "Please? I'm sorry."

He nodded once.

This conversation brought back all his memories with Ganyu, how even in the relaxed moments she would speak to fill the silence, voice her thoughts in bursts, and allow her passion to bottle before bursting with positivity.

It made sense that she would be the same for more complicated thoughts, like how she felt about Xiao.

"It's okay," he exhaled slowly. "I think I understand."

She smiled with relief, and the invisible glass in the air melted. "Thank you," she said softly.

"I still believe what I told you before, Ganyu," he said. "You don't need the humans' approval in the city to know that you're doing well, and you don't need *me* to think you're worthy or unworthy of your position." He lifted the corner of his mouth in a half-smile. "I still support you."

Ganyu's eye crinkled as she smiled deeper, though there was a melancholiness behind it. "Thank you."

Just one more thing. "There's something I don't understand, though. Would you explain it to me?"

She looked down at the pond, where a golden koi was doing flips in the clear water. "I'll do my best."

"I know where I stand with you," Xiao said, trying to be delicate. "We are friends, and nothing that happens will erase the history that we have." His eyes rolled up as he thought for a moment.

How do I say this?

"So... Why does any of that matter to the Traveler?"

Ganyu burst out laughing, a short series of "Ha! Haha!" that had the Traveler and a couple of Millelith looking over from across the square.

"*What is it?*" Xiao whispered, feeling the awkwardness creep up his spine again — though it was different this time, more of him knowing that Ganyu's next words would be a secret and less like a fear of doing something wrong — but still awkward.

Ganyu sighed and pressed her palm to her forehead, smiling. “Xiao, do you like her?”

He blinked once. He blinked twice. “Hah?”

“She really likes you, Xiao,” Ganyu said slowly, like he was a child.

He blinked again.

“She likes you!” Ganyu laughed again, pressing her palm against the railing of the corridor. “And I don’t mean she likes you the way that you like almond tofu or Rex Lapis. I mean she likes you the way that we used to like each other, or the way that Guizhong and Rex Lapis liked each other.” She looked up, and her purple eyes were dancing. “Do you understand?”

Xiao’s head lurched forward a bit. All at once, Ganyu was the one comfortable in her space, while Xiao just compressed further into his own body.

“You should give her a chance!” Ganyu tilted her head. “You deserve to be happy, Xiao.”

“Do I?” he asked numbly. *What a day I am having.*

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry I said those things to her about you, but she still wants to be at your side. Doesn’t that mean something?” She slowed down a bit, tone evolving to be more understanding. “It takes effort and sacrifice to be close to someone, and she’s obviously willing to put in the work. She likes you!”

Ganyu was practically bouncing at this point, and Xiao scowled, though there was no heat behind the expression. “Wasn’t she literally making suggestive comments in your ear just yesterday? Wasn’t she annoying you basically the whole day?”

“Xiao, *trust me*. Trust me as a human.” Ganyu smiled. “I understand her, and she likes you. You’ll have someone to fight alongside you, all night and all day. You could be an adventurer, like I always knew you would be!” She lowered her eyes, and Xiao knew she was remembering the day that they had parted ways.

(“You’re the coolest and strongest adventurer, and you know all that Teyvat has to offer. That’s the future you deserve, Xiao. That’s the future I see for you.”)

“I’m sorry that I was always too busy for you,” Ganyu continued gently, “but Lumine... Lumine is different, and I’m sure you can tell. Truly. If we were parallel lines, the Traveler is a hot air balloon.”

Xiao furrowed his eyebrows at the confusing metaphor. “She probably only likes me because I saved her once. Humans often confuse their grateful brain chemistry with feelings like this.” *There’s no way.*

Ganyu shook her head. “Oh, come off it. She thought you were attractive long before the battle with Osial.”

Agh. “Alright. Thank you for... speaking with me.”

His busy mind must have still been showing on his face, because Ganyu tapped the railing for his attention.

“Hey,” she said softly. “To this day when I feel anxious, I still do the grounding technique you taught me. It helps a lot. Thank you.”

He smiled, just a little. "I'm glad I could help you." *Thank YOU.* "Be well, Ganyu," he said as his shoulders finally released all the tension from the day. "Don't work too hard."

"I'll do my best!" She laughed as she walked out of the corridor. "The same goes for you. Be happy."

Xiao slowly followed, stopping when she stopped at the edge of the main building. There was an air of finality about her as she looked up at him, fingers laced and unmoving before her.

"We'll always be friends, Xiao," she said sincerely.

"Of course," he agreed. He didn't know what that would look like for them, but of course she would always have a special place in his heart. "Have a good rest of your day," he added, mostly because he didn't know what else to say.

"I will! Goodbye." Ganyu laughed again, a little bemused, but she turned and entered the side of the Pavilion with one last wave to the Traveler before the door closed behind her.

Xiao breathed in.

The Traveler walked around to the side of the building, gazing cautiously at Xiao. "So... How did that go?"

Breathe out. Slowly. His jaw clenched and unclenched. "It was fine."

It was really awkward, it was kind of painful, it was almost more agonizing than anything else eeeeeegh why...

But it had been necessary, and it was over now.

He crossed his arms and tipped his head back, looking at the gaps of bright blue sky where the roofs of the Liyuen buildings didn't reach. "Thank you, Traveler."

She shrugged one shoulder. "It was nothing. I take it she's going to stay here, though. I think that's a good choice for her."

Xiao nodded, and the Traveler smiled a little. He started walking back in the direction out of the city, and she matched his steps beside him. It was quiet except for the sound of their footsteps against the cobblestones, and the soft rustling of Xiao's mask on its chain.

"You guys were together at some point, huh?" The Traveler asked, casual, swinging her arms gently at her sides.

"Mm..." He sighed. "It wasn't as cut-and-clear as you make it sound. It was a very different time."

He could feel her looking at him like she expected him to go on. He did not.

She hummed thoughtfully. "I think she has some issues that I kind of understand, but also not really. I think I know what it feels like to be stuck in the middle." She paused to kick at a pebble, and Xiao instinctively stopped to wait for her to start walking again. "I'm just a traveler here. I know. And everyone, including you, basically only calls me 'Traveler.' So I don't belong here, but at least I *know* I don't belong here."

The energy of her mood shifted then, clouded in an anxious, lost power, exactly like what Xiao had sensed when he had first met her, and she fell silent.

Xiao was very aware of the Traveler beside him, each step of her heels clicking against the stones. Why was he walking, again? Why didn't he just teleport home? She was still wearing that perfume that smelled like dreams. Was he really still here? *Why?*

"I'm here for one reason, and one reason only," she said simply. "I'm looking for my brother. I don't mind that I don't belong, and I don't mind that no one will know me by anything other than *'Traveler'* no matter what I do or accomplish. I don't need to fit in. I know why I'm here."

She has a brother. She's looking for her brother.

Xiao didn't know what to say. He could feel the uncomfy awkwardness growing on him again, standing in the presence of someone with so much burning ambition and purpose, when he himself was generally without such a certain purpose. His boots were heavy against the ground.

The Traveler shook her head then, and the sunshine of her smile burst through the clouds of her fear. "Sorry, I got distracted. My point is that I know at least that I don't belong here, but I don't think that Ganyu knows where she belongs at all."

Do I even know where I belong?

"Ganyu is half-human and half-qilin," he said plainly, a little irritated for some indiscernible reason. "I suppose it makes sense that sometimes she feels stuck in the middle."

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. "Don't you sometimes feel that way?" She shrugged again. "I thought that you would have been a really good teacher for her."

Xiao sighed. *This again.* "Having a couple of things in common doesn't qualify me to be a suitable mentor for her. I'm a killer. Ganyu is not meant for that kind of life."

"Well, I don't know about that," the Traveler grinned. "She destroyed that trial you designed for her. Pyro whopperflowers are *nothing* against Ganyu's Cryo."

"Don't make light of the purpose of the adepti," Xiao hissed. He abruptly stopped walking, and the Traveler took a couple of steps back. He curled his hands into fists, feeling the familiar crescents of pain as his nails dug into his palms. "Ganyu can be powerful, but that doesn't change the fact that I became an adeptus for the purpose of being a weapon. I don't do anything else, and I'm the only one that's been able to handle it for this long, so if you don't want trouble, then you should *stay away from me.*" He exhaled raggedly, a pathetic sound. "I am not a teacher. I am not a friend or follower to anyone besides Rex Lapis. All I am is a weapon, and nothing more than that."

The Traveler breathed out softly.

Xiao looked up and was immediately met with her giant yellow eyes staring at him, narrowed softly in thought, head tilted to one side as she considered him.

Shit.

Shut. Up. IDIOT.

What am I doing?

Why did I say all of that?

He opened his mouth to apologize, but abruptly closed it again. What was there to apologize for? Everything he'd said to her was true, even if she hadn't deserved to hear it this way. It was better

for her to find out now rather than later, before she could try to get closer to him than she already was.

Ganyu had told him that the Traveler liked him, but that was only now. “*It takes effort and sacrifice to be close to someone, and she’s obviously willing to put in the work,*” she’d said. Effort, sacrifice, and work; for the average being, *maybe*. For Xiao? It would be so much more than that.

He should just leave. *It’s better this way.*

Before he could just teleport and vanish on the spot, the Traveler smiled.

“You keep saying things like that,” she said sweetly, “but all that I’ve seen from you, other than a few instances of being pretty blunt and rude, is gentleness. You can say things like that, but I’ll only believe it when I see it.”

Xiao smiled back, but it was wholly bitter. “You don’t know me.”

“Nope.” She leaned forward. “But I want to.”

How was she still capable of surprising him?

“Your mind occupies a totally different world from us, doesn’t it?” He turned and started walking again, and she fell easily into step with him. They were approaching the outskirts of the city, and yet for some reason, they were still walking together. “Why are you still here?” He brought his hands together, polishing the surface of his Vision with his thumb. “Don’t you have a mission, a purpose to accomplish in Teyvat?” *Why are you walking with me? Why are you wasting your time on me?*

“Hmmm...” she hummed theatrically, faux-thoughtful. Her eyes never left his face. “Because I like being around you.”

Archons above and below. For the hundredth time in the last couple of days, a new kind of *bu hao yisi* snuck under his skin, purely from the special attention the Traveler was dedicating to him. He shook his head, trying to clear the flustered awkwardness from behind his eyes. “I can’t tell if you’re joking or not.”

“Hah,” she laughed, and he lifted his head at the bright sound. “Well, let me say this: stick with me for long enough, and you’ll be able to tell.”

He *almost* smiled at that, but he did huff a laugh through his nose. “We’ll see.” He paused. “Lumine.”

Chapter End Notes

How was your day? Love you in the best way that I can <3

[Ganyu’s Story Quest](#)

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Chapter Summary

when a crowd of possessed hilichurls appeared early that evening on the shore just north of the inn, Xiao went out to take care of them. It wasn't hard. Hilichurls were not a challenge for Xiao's power.

... Which is why he was surprised when Lumine came sprinting towards him just as the last hilichurl hit the ground, Paimon trailing behind her and screeching. She skidded to a stop on the sand. "Xiao," she panted, her cheeks red from running.

"Lumine," Xiao greeted her warily. "There were some demon-possessed hilichurls. I hope I didn't cause you any inconvenience."

"Xiao, Xiao, *Xiao*," Lumine hissed a little more urgently, catching her breath. "There's this guy saying that he can grant wishes, and he's a fucking idiot, and I swear Xiao *I swear* that he's just scamming people into giving money and it's so freaking wrong and so evil I can't even begin to tell you, I just can't."

Chapter Notes

Tw; mention of self-harm, panic, PTSD flashbacks

Translations to all Chinese in the end notes

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

With admittedly not very much thought towards Lumine or the things that Ganyu had told him about her, Xiao fell back into routine, not expecting either of them to greatly affect his life. Ganyu would be busy, and Lumine would continue on her adventure, and Xiao would keep doing what he'd always done. The three of them had their own lives, and the occurrences of the past were just that.

Or so he thought.

Life after the 'death' of Rex Lapis, which still made his stomach churn if he thought too hard about it, looked like quiet and still days, nights shorter than he was accustomed to, and weekly tea with Zhongli. Both Liyue and Xiao fell into a steady rhythm of generally peaceful days and relatively easy nights. Hilichurls, Abyss mages, and other mobs still infiltrated the land, but the stream of demonic miasma that had been nearly constant for centuries had calmed immensely. For the most part, adventurers and Millelith were fully capable of handling mobs on their own, but Xiao would still hunt down those that were frenzied with possession. Maybe Zhongli had dismissed his contract on a technicality, but Xiao still just felt that it was right to protect the land, or at least the Wangshu Inn.

Even in the daytime, when Xiao had no real obligation to fight anything without demons, he took it

upon himself to fend off any mob that got too close to the Inn. It wasn't as though Xiao had anything else to do; sometimes the hilichurls were even a welcome interruption to what was often a slow day.

On this day, however, he was surprised to see that Lumine had beaten him to it.

"Hi, Xiao," she greeted him, dusting off her hands as the still-glittering remains of a mitachurl wisped into the wind. "What's up?"

"Tra—" he caught himself — "Lumine." He surveyed the mess of broken masks and arrowheads on the ground. Water from the inlet shore washed some of them away. "Why are you here?"

"Happy to see you, too," she joked, smiling and shaking her head at her feet. "I'm just taking care of some hilichurls. Verr Goldet and Huai'an, the innkeepers, asked me to."

Xiao wrinkled his forehead. "They have no need to do that. I can handle hilichurls in this area."

"Totally." Lumine nodded. "But they asked me, and of course I'm not going to turn down a commission. I could use the Mora."

"Why would they ask you?" He wondered aloud. *Do they not trust me to protect them? Are they afraid of me?*

Lumine snorted, pulling Xiao's attention. "What, do you not think I can handle it?"

"No. That would be ridiculous. I've seen your power."

Lumine smiled at Xiao's puzzlement. "I really think it's because they don't want you to have to do it, Xiao."

"I don't know why that would be the case."

"I don't know either," she shrugged. "You seem to like it when it's quiet, and they don't want to bother you. I don't think that I'm doing anything different from what you would do... Hehe." She giggled a little, and Xiao stared at her. "Maybe it's more socially acceptable for any passing humans to see *me* fighting off hilichurls than it is for them to see *you*."

Xiao frowned. "Why?"

"Don't know!" Lumine laughed, looking up at the bright daylight in the clear air. "I've been taking on a lot of commissions and agreeing to do whatever random requests and bounties I can, just to explore the nations. I don't really have a specific goal right now. It's pretty chill, but the downside of that is that now pretty much everyone just sees me as *The Traveler Who Does Whatever They Want*." She sighed, but then she smiled again. "It's okay. It's not as though I have anything else to do, and the exposure is nice. I'm just thinking that people would now be more or less accustomed to seeing me in passing, fighting mobs or delivering almond tofu to little brats who won't take their medicine."

The wrinkles in Xiao's forehead ran deeper as he raised his eyebrows.

Lumine coughed when she realized, but she was smirking. "Ahh... I promise I wasn't talking about you."

"Mhm."

“I promise. Her name is Hongdou, and she’s definitely being scammed by Baizhu, but somehow it falls on me to deliver almond tofu to her when she doesn’t want to take her dumb medicine.”

Xiao cocked his head. “*Hongdou*, like ‘red bean?’”

Lumine squinted back at him. “My Liyuen isn’t really good enough for me to say, but it’s also not good enough to make up a name like that, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

She’d read his mind.

Xiao exhaled softly, barely hiding a laugh.

“Don’t laugh at my bad Liyuen!” Lumine folded her arms in a faux-huff. “It took me a while to even learn the common language of Teyvat. I still can’t read as well as I’d like to, and let me tell you — coming to Liyue and finding out that there was *another language* gave me culture shock.”

“Oh.” A little whisper of pity escaped Xiao’s lips. “There are seven regions in Teyvat, Lumine, and I’m pretty sure they all have their own regional dialects.”

Lumine pinched the bridge of her nose. “Thanks,” she groaned. “That’s very encouraging.”

Xiao sighed. “Honestly, I think that your Liyuen is fine, but you can come find me and ask if you need something translated in the future.”

The offer was out before he knew he meant it. *Oh*.

Lumine’s large eyes grew larger. “Are you sure?”

His mind blanked. *Where did this boldness come from? Am I really doing this? Am I?*

Lumine must have seen all of Xiao’s rational thoughts fly out of his ears, because she grinned even as she whispered, “Please, don’t take it back.”

It wasn’t like he had anything to lose. *Why not?* “Yes, I’m sure.”

So it began.

◇ ◇ ◇

He hadn’t truly expected Lumine to show up at odd times asking him miscellaneous questions about Liyue, but she visited consistently every couple of days following this offer. She would just appear at Wangshu Inn in the afternoon, or sometimes she’d be waiting on the roof for him at sunrise after a night of demon hunting.

“I haven’t been able to ask anyone this, and now it’s been too long and I’m afraid to look dumb,” Lumine announced one day, walking up the roof tiles to Xiao. “What does *Liyue* mean?”

Xiao thought for a moment. “*Li* is hard to translate. It could be glass-like varnish, or glaze. Or it could technically be jade. *Yue* means moon.”

“Glass Moon? Jade Moon?” Lumine looked out over the country as if searching for something. “Why is the region named Liyue?”

“Why are you named Lumine?” Xiao shrugged.

“Hah. Fair point.” It was almost audible when her eyes slid all the way over to look at him. “Why

are you named Xiao?”

Xiao’s spine stiffened.

There was a deeper question there, a silent request to know Xiao in a way that he didn’t want to face. All at once his hands felt cold.

“Rex Lapis named me Xiao after a legend from another world.”

Please let that be enough.

“Oh. Cool.” Lumine nodded, dropping to sit on the green roof tiles. “I wonder what *Mondstadt* means. Maybe I’ll ask Verr Goldet.”

Xiao closed his eyes and relaxed into the sunlight. It was easy to stop thinking around Lumine when the conversations remained this shallow.

◇ ◇ ◇

“Xiao, you told me that *lan* means blue.”

“It does mean blue.”

“There’s an adventurer in the Liyuen guild whose name is Lan.”

“... Her name probably isn’t blue.”

“...”

“Did you ask her if her name meant blue?”

“I didn’t know what else it could mean!”

“Do you know someone who would name their child Blue?”

“Well, apparently I know a child named *red bean*, so blue didn’t seem that far off.”

“Mm.”

◇ ◇ ◇

“Someone today called me a *huaidan*.”

“Who said it to you?”

“Ningguang.”

“... It could go in two ways. The literal translation is ‘bad egg,’ but it could be used affectionately or used to scold. It depends on the context.”

“Oh.”

“What?”

“If there’s a bad egg, is there a good egg? *Guaidan*?”

“That’s not a term.”

“It *should* be.”

“That’s not up to you.”

“I’m using it anyway.”

“Suit yourself.”

“Hey, Xiao.”

“Yes.”

“I think you’re a *guaidan*.”

“... Thank you.”

“Do you think I’m a *guaidan*?”

“... Mm.”

◇ ◇ ◇

“我不会说中文。”

”可是听起来像你会说。”

”我真的不会。”

”你说谎。”

“Xiao, don’t use words I don’t understand. What does that mean?”

“I called you a liar.”

“... 你坏蛋。”

”你前天说我是乖蛋。”

“I thought you said *guaidan* wasn’t a real term.”

“You can’t have it both ways.”

“... 好吧。”

◇ ◇ ◇

“Verr Goldet left this for you,” Lumine called as she walked up the stairs to the balcony, holding a plate of almond tofu. “I had to stop by her counter for something, so she told me to just bring it up.”

Xiao looked up from where he was sitting on the balcony. “Thank you.” He stretched out his hand for the dish, and Lumine passed it over as she sat beside him and crossed her legs.

“Hey,” she started. “What exactly do the normal guests in the inn think is on the roof? I realize that your presence is a secret because only Zhongli and I get to bother you, but what do they think is up here?”

He swallowed a bite of almond tofu. The sweet texture would never get old. “There are different stories going around. I don’t know what the latest is.” He glanced over. “Why do you ask?”

Lumine scooted closer to the railing, sliding to let her legs hang off the edge of the balcony, sending Xiao’s blood pressure up and casually kicking her feet back and forth. “I was already curious, but today someone in the lobby kind of stage-whispered to me how he’d heard that I’ve been to the top floor. At the end, he said, ‘don’t worry, you can tell me, I won’t tell anyone, I promise’ and offered me a thousand Mora.”

Xiao rolled his eyes as Lumine made a disgusted face. *Humans*. “What did you tell him?”

She turned to look at him, a sneaky smile crossing lips and reaching her eyes. “He asked me ‘what’s upstairs,’ and I said ‘I don’t know, they can’t talk’ and walked away.”

Pft. Xiao cracked a small smile as Lumine laughed at her own dumb joke. “Did you only come here to ask me that? What’s the Liyuen word you need translated today?”

“Oh.” Lumine knitted her eyebrows. “I don’t have one today. I was just going to bring you the almond tofu and hang out.”

Xiao’s eye twitched, and a part of his brain immediately swirled up into a tornado of *you’re getting too close, too close, too close, too close too close too close too close tooclosetooclosetooclose—!*

Lumine yawned, stretching an arm all the way up over her head. “You don’t have to humor me or anything. We don’t have to talk. I might even take a nap, since I finally get some quiet away from Paimon. Is that okay?”

The anxious tornado slowed, and Xiao folded his arms. “It’s okay.”

◇ ◇ ◇

Then a week went by without any sign of Lumine. Even Zhongli didn’t know where she’d gone.

Xiao felt the loss, but he wasn’t particularly surprised or concerned. She could take care of herself, and she had no obligation to him. He went about his life as before, albeit with a quieter day than he’d had in weeks.

Naturally, when a crowd of possessed hilichurls appeared early that evening on the shore just north of the inn, Xiao went out to take care of them. It wasn’t hard. Hilichurls were not a challenge for Xiao’s power.

... Which is why he was surprised when Lumine came sprinting towards him just as the last hilichurl hit the ground, Paimon trailing behind her and screeching. She skidded to a stop on the sand. “Xiao,” she panted, her cheeks red from running.

“Lumine,” Xiao greeted her warily. “There were some demon-possessed hilichurls. I hope I didn’t cause you any inconvenience.”

“Xiao, Xiao, *Xiao*,” Lumine hissed a little more urgently, catching her breath. “There’s this guy saying that he can grant wishes, and he’s a fucking idiot, and I swear Xiao I *swear* that he’s just scamming people into giving money and it’s so freaking wrong and so evil I can’t even begin to tell you, I just can’t.”

Xiao blinked, trying to follow. “Slow down, Lumine—”

“*Don’t tell me to slow down, Xiao!*” Lumine cried out, digging her foot into the sand. “This fraud, this evil idiot, has a man selling his belongings because he thinks that Starsnatcher will heal his father from sickness, and this other lady literally gave away her entire wedding budget on gimmicks to try to get her *ex-fiance* back! *Why?*”

Xiao put his face in his hands and sighed. A human, posing as an adeptus to steal from other humans? Shame on the man for faking adeptushood. Shame on the other humans for believing that an adeptus had any need for Mora. *Fucking humans.*

“It’s a disgrace,” Lumine spat, waving her arms and almost knocking Paimon out of the air. “He wears a mask, but he won’t take it off! At all! That’s not how this works, is it?” She looked intensely at Xiao, questioning. “It’s not as though all adepti wear masks, right?”

“No.” Xiao shook his head. “It’s only me as a yaksha.”

“Yaksha,” Paimon mumbled.

Lumine glared at her out of the very corner of her eye. “Starsnipper said he was an adeptus, and *Paimon* here had the audacity to fall for it.”

“*Hey!*” the little fairy shrieked. “I did not! Paimon knew all along he was a fake!”

“Don’t try to lie to Xiao, you flying brat,” Lumine snapped back.

Paimon glowered in what she probably thought was a threatening way, but she turned to face Xiao. “We saw him at the bookstore, and he bought the book, the *Yakshas, the Guardian Adepti*! Why would he buy the book if he’s an adeptus?”

“We didn’t mention this,” Lumine muttered, “but he did manage to fend off some hilichurls that had a purplish aura about them, I’m assuming that’s what possession looks like, and he used a sigil of permission, and it worked once, but then just now it didn’t work, because, like I said, *he’s a fraud!*” She was practically out of breath by the end of the sentence, but she gathered herself and peered up at Xiao. “And now we’re here. Hello.”

“... Hi.” Xiao could feel other demonic presences tugging on the edges of his senses, drawing his attention. Exasperation fell over him.

Paimon leaned closer to Lumine, whispering not-quite quietly enough for Xiao to miss. “He’s the Vigilant Yaksha, isn’t he? The one from the book?”

The fairy’s voice, shrill and grating as ever, took on a tone of immense pity as she sniffed. Xiao’s jaw clenched over the inside of his cheek.

“Aww... That’s so sad...”

Fuck it.

“I can hear you,” Xiao said coldly, and Paimon’s eyes flew wide open. “You’re talking about that

book, the fan fiction from centuries back, that doesn't even begin to scratch the surface of what truly happened. Did you read it?"

Paimon looked away, embarrassed, but Lumine sighed. "Yes."

"I do not need your pity." It had been a long time since he'd read that trash. *What do they know? What did they find out about me?* "All things are impermanent, and to exist is to suffer. But we do not need your pity. Do not cry for us." He glared at Paimon, who flinched. "Your tears are a stain on my family's legacy."

He kind of knew he was talking too much, but he didn't really care.

Guilt crossed the fairy's small face. "Sorry," she said quietly.

"Mm." He folded his arms across his chest. The demonic presence at the edge of his senses was getting closer.

Lumine turned to Paimon. "Why don't you go back to the Wanmin Restaurant and stay with Xiangling for a bit? Ask her to make you food. I'll pay for it."

The fairy buzzed off without another word, food clearly at the forefront of her mind.

Xiao frowned as he watched her go. "You didn't have to part ways for my benefit. I have other demons to deal with tonight. Good night." He turned and started walking down the shore towards the presence he felt; there must have been a cavern full of possessed hilichurls or the like.

He *hated* caverns. He hated being out of sight from the sky. He hated having no one to hold up the roof, to watch his back, to lead him out if he panicked...

"Wait." Lumine took a couple of quick steps, giving Xiao a berth of space as she moved up to his side. "Let me go with you."

His teeth dug harder into the flesh of his cheek, and he stopped to stare at her. "I don't need your help. I usually fight alone, and I'm strong enough. This isn't your battle."

Lumine rolled her eyes. "Of course I know that you're *strong* enough. I just want to go."

"Why?"

"Because I want to make up for Paimon being a *Paimon* without the *mo*."

A whisper of a laugh breezed through Xiao's teeth, sharp and a little too sudden, but he nodded at Lumine with a straight face. "Alright, then." He turned and continued down the shore, and Lumine followed at a respectful distance.

"So, what are we in for?" She asked, kicking at the sand. "Where do these demons come from? And what makes possessed creatures different from regular ones?"

Xiao scoffed. "Didn't you read that horrible book about yakshas? Did it not answer all of your questions?"

Lumine huffed right back at him. "Well, you called it fan fiction, so I'd love to hear the genuine story from the real thing. Will you explain it to me as the primary source?"

That was fair. Xiao sighed, deep breaths in and out, sifting through his words carefully. "Morax killed many during the Archon War, the spirits of those who died broke down into demons,

yakshas killed demons every night for years. By ‘killed,’ I mean that their souls splintered and fractured increasingly until they became nothing but whispers or memories. The bodies are destroyed, and the spirits lose their sense of self, though their hate and resentment will remain and possess whatever is nearby — hilichurls, abyss mages, whopperflowers, slimes...” *Inhale. Exhale.* “Osial’s essence has eroded over time, so the version of him that you saw is already highly devolved from what he used to be. Whatever eroded off of him will affect the living creatures now.”

“I think I understand.” Lumine nodded slowly. “And this all has an effect on you?”

Phantom wires bit painfully into Xiao’s wrists, and he rubbed at his forearms impatiently. “The consequences of killing and the price of a yaksha’s power builds up negative karma. All I can really do is accept the karmic debt.” His fingers crept under his gauntlet, pressing his nails hard into the skin there, easing his frustration just a bit.

“So you’ve been dealing with karma for centuries, alone,” Lumine said softly, not a question, just a statement of fact. Even though there was no disgusting pity in her voice, her tone was unmistakably, irritatingly sad.

Xiao tore his hands apart, rolling his fingers into fists at his sides. “I would rather face it alone than drag other living beings into it, like you now. Suffering is my price to pay. I accept this.”

“That sounds horrible,” Lumine muttered.

I don’t want your pity. “I’ve learned to deal with most of it.” His left hand curled tighter, pressing familiar crescents into his palm. “I have had a life that prepared me for it.”

Silence fell between them, an invisible curtain of tension that both refused to answer Lumine’s questions and refused to release the rigid knot bound in Xiao’s throat. Sand flew up and fell again at their feet, sh sh sh with every step, a hammering reminder of Xiao’s need to keep his story from the Traveler. *Don’t pity me, don’t, don’t, don’t...*

“The yaksha from the book,” Lumine started quietly. Dread looped around Xiao’s neck, pulling the knot in his throat tighter. “The fifth one that survived...” She turned her face to look at Xiao, but he couldn’t look back at her. “Are you Alatus?”

The loop tightened. Pain crushed his nerves, blocking his windpipe, forcing deep claws of dark, bloody fear into his flesh. His eyes scrunched shut and his teeth closed sharply around his lip as he tried not to full-on scream.

No.

None of that happened to me. It was someone else. A different yaksha, without this power, without this body, without this face.

It didn’t happen to me.

“...I used to be.” The words came out in a pathetic attempt at normalcy. He could taste and smell blood; he’d punctured his lip and his palms again. He gritted his teeth and forced his legs to carry him forward, even though they felt like they were wrapped in steel. He hadn’t even realized that he had stopped walking.

Lumine didn’t speak again as they approached the mouth of the cave where Xiao had sensed the demonic miasma. Her eyebrows stayed furrowed. She was clearly aware that she had reached an invisible boundary with Xiao and was trying hard to identify it.

Xiao didn't want her to find out. *She is not my friend. She has no reason to know anything about me.* "I will be using the Bane of All Evil ritual to clear this cavern," he said, voice as stable as he could manage. *She is not my friend. She should see me as a weapon, and nothing else.* "There are a lot more possessed creatures than I usually face. If you speak to me, I might not hear you." He turned his mask over in his hand.

"Wait, let me help..."

Lumine's voice disappeared under the cacophony of noise in Xiao's head, immediate cries of *HATE HATE HATE HATE HATE HATE HATE HATE* that had ceased to make phonetic sense.

Through the dark cloud of his very being pulling apart, Xiao wondered just how many living creatures he had killed. He could no longer truly remember the words that the few souls haunting his karma used to say before the voices multiplied to the point that he couldn't make them out anymore; or, he'd internalized those words until they were no longer karmic voices, but his own internal thoughts.

"Worthless."

There weren't particularly threatening forces in the cavern

hate hate

at best, there were Pyro slimes that Xiao cut to drops before they could even land a spark on him

I know things I shouldn't I've done things I shouldn't

and at worst there was a Pyro abyss mage that was too slow to get out of the way of his plunging attacks

god, this hurts I want it to stop

slimes, mitachurls, and hilichurls, with their pathetic little bodies wracked with demons

worthless weapon, DISAPPEAR

fell quickly and easily to Xiao's jade spear.

He was panting by the time he released his mask's hold on his body, grimacing as the stabbing pain between his ribs faded and the discordance in his mind dropped to abrupt silence.

"Holy shit," Lumine said softly, unreadable.

Xiao didn't look at her. He hadn't sensed her following him through the cavern, watching him actually trying in combat for the first time. *Breathe.*

She kicked at some of the mess of horns, tattered papers, and broken hilichurl masks that scattered across the ground, carefully stepping over a particularly offensive patch of slime droplets that could very well have been blood. "I almost feel bad for them," she murmured. "You are *amazing*. Wow."

He ignored the comment and shook his head, taking another moment to steady himself on his feet.

“Don’t feel bad for them. It’s good that we found them when we did. If they had continued to congregate, or made an attack on the city...” He shook his head again, stretching the muscles in his shoulders. “I don’t even want to think about the consequences.”

“You’re right.” Lumine stepped lightly on a whole hilichurl mask, and it cracked like a wafer under her foot. “You wear your mask when you fight. Would you tell me more about it?”

Xiao tensed, snapping his attention towards her so suddenly that she startled. “What do you want to know?”

“Nothing in particular!” She put her hands out in front of her in what she probably hoped was a reassuring way. “I’m just a little confused by the Starsnatcher-bastard-fraud-man. He wears a mask constantly, and he thinks that that is enough to get people to believe that he’s really an adeptus.”

“Starsnatcher?” Xiao thought for a moment. There were plenty of adepti during the Archon War that he hadn’t met before, potentially hundreds of qilin and divine humans and gods that knew of him and he wouldn’t recognize, but he for sure had never once heard the name *Starsnatcher*. “I don’t know this name.”

“He didn’t *fight* the hilichurls off, either.” Lumine started to fume. “Would any responsible adeptus allow the hilichurls to just be chased off instead of eradicating them entirely? What’s the point of chasing them off? So they can congregate in a cavern and become a *real* adeptus’s problem?”

Xiao scowled, a little disappointed that the modern-day Liyuens would be falling for this kind of scam. “The audacity,” he muttered. “Centuries ago, Liyuens would never believe in blatant lies like this. Even if we could grant wishes, why would we? Our job is to protect the nation, not grant their wishes.”

Lumine blinked at him. “Xiao, are you a boomer?”

He blinked back. “Excuse me?”

“Nothing.” She waved non-committedly, but she couldn’t stop the smile that snuck across her face. “Starsnatcher chases the demons off with a sigil of permission like the one that I have. What do we do about it?”

This, at least, was easy. “We take the sigil away from him, and he stops being a fraud.”

“Okay, we’ll confiscate it.” Lumine thumped her fist against her open hand. “And then we’ll beat the snot out of him!”

“*No.*” Xiao snapped, mind on high alert. “I don’t kill humans.”

Lumine knit her eyebrows.

Very, very slowly, her head tilted to the side, yellow eyes wide and trained on Xiao the whole time, eyebrows twisting upwards in concern as she stared at him. “I wasn’t going to *kill* him,” she said carefully. “Ah... Are you okay?”

Idiot. Of course the Traveler didn’t kill humans. She was good. She’d probably never killed a human, ever. *Why would I even have considered that? Stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Xiao sighed inwardly, realizing that Lumine was still watching him, waiting for a response.

“I suppose it would benefit the nation if we disciplined him enough to stop being terrible to his

fellow Liyuens,” he muttered, dodging the question.

“Fantastic!” Lumine beamed, question forgotten. “How would we do that? To be honest, I don’t know how to find the Starsniper again. He kind of just comes and goes.”

Ah.

Shit.

Xiao considered the possibilities, but how was anyone supposed to locate one faceless, nameless man in the sea of faces of the nation? In the end, there really was only one way to find this man without too much wasted time or interaction or interference with the daily life of Liyue. *Was it worth it? Was it really, really worth it?*

Honestly, he probably should have known that this would resurface before long.

“I haven’t done this ritual in a really long time. I haven’t done it *properly* in even longer.” Xiao clenched his jaw. “The Dream Trawler is a ritual that separates the spirit from the body. It’s supposed to be used for deep meditation, but...” *Breathe in.* “... I can use it to summon the shade of a human.” *Breathe out.*

“Oh, it’s like astral projection. I get it.” Lumine nodded. “Tonight? Can we do the Dream Trawler tonight?”

Blood washed over Xiao’s tongue. He’d bitten through his cheek again. “We would have to prepare some things first.”

Lumine’s eyes fell to his lips, and a quiet question crossed her face, but she mercifully did not voice it. “What can I do to help?”

Archons.

Memories that Xiao had hoped he’d forgotten surged forward, clouding his mind with thoughts of blackstone and thick chains and searing hot iron, sand under his feet, cool Dragonspine air chilling his skin, dirty fingers capped with nail guards twisting in his hair, the smell of incense—

Don’t panic in front of the Traveler don’t panic don’t

He hissed softly, fully aware that there was blood dripping inside his gloves from his palms to his knuckles. Why were these memories still so dark? Shouldn’t enough time have passed that they could erode like everything else? How unfair was it that he still had to hold on to this visible, tangible fucking trauma that he had spent so long trying to *forget*? How unfair was it that *he now needed the very information that he wanted to forget*?

“Mm...” His voice was ragged and strained. He wouldn’t look at the Traveler. “I need a censer. And lamps, I think seven of them, and something cold enough to make the air cold.” He swallowed hard against the newly tightened knot in his throat. His scalp stung with phantom pain that had nothing to do with karma. *Breathe in. Breathe out.* “If you go to the ruined shrines by Mount Tianheng, you should find what you need. The Qixing set those up for the yakshas a long time ago, but they should still have some ceremonial items there.”

“Alright,” Lumine said, quiet and reassuring. “I will figure it out.”

“Meet me at the yaksha statues outside the city tomorrow night, and we will fix this.” *I have to go.* “Goodbye.”

He didn't wait for her to say any farewell in return. He immediately teleported to Mount Aocang with a *crack*.

The morning sun was coming up over the edge of the horizon, all at once too bright and too warm and too good for Xiao. It should have been a welcome sight after the last hour or so spent in a cavern.

Xiao couldn't appreciate it. He collapsed into a heap on the rocky peak of the mountain, drawing his legs close and putting his head between his knees, focusing his breath while dark spots danced in front of his eyes. *Inhale. Exhale.*

He had thought, centuries ago, after losing his old spear and gaining a new name and burning the clothes that he'd worn as a slave and cutting his hair and cutting his skin and being essentially an entirely new person from *Alatus* would mean that he could release these memories, too, but these memories were a part of him. His knowledge he wished he didn't know, his experience he wished to never repeat, his training, his ability to resist karma and even be *alive* right now, were all just the amalgamation of all that he had been through. To forget would mean losing his identity entirely, both the good and the bad.

Maybe another day, another week, another month, another year had passed between who he was before and who he was now, but the trauma followed him like a shadow, a heavy, crushing, all-encompassing mountain of a shadow.

He should have known that all this time of acting like the past didn't happen, pretending that he had the right to act as though he was more than a weapon, *spending time with Lumine like she thought he was whole* would have to come to an end. He curled tighter around himself, a small and bleeding ball of hate and shame shaking in the sunlight.

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Night came too soon. He'd allowed himself to forget how it always came too soon. The whole day he'd spent in the sun had ticked away, hour by hour, and Xiao had to physically peel himself off the rock limb by limb to gather the motivation to go to the agreed-upon meeting spot with Lumine, who was waiting for him with the items he'd ask for spread out around her.

The purpose of this meeting and mission was a welcome distraction, even though a slight tingle of annoyance shot through his temples when he realized that Paimon was floating at Lumine's shoulder.

"Xiao," she greeted him as he approached. "I think I got everything. I hope mist flowers are chilly enough for the ritual to work."

Xiao nodded in response, looking over the high-quality censer and star-shaped lamps that Lumine had brought. The bronze of the large censer was burnished from use, and the lamps were ancient, but they were somehow still in excellent condition. "These are excellent. You got them from the ruined shrines, and they were still in this good of a state?" He ran a gloved hand across the edge of the censer.

"Yes!" Paimon answered quickly. "Actually, we—"

"*We did,*" Lumine interrupted. "We got them from a shrine with a statue of a bird." She placed several mist flowers into a bronze bowl she must have taken from the shrine as well.

There was a very careful edge in her tone, and she kept shooting commanding glares at Paimon

every so often. A lesser being wouldn't have noticed.

But of course Xiao did.

He frowned. It wasn't in Lumine's nature to hide things. "What else did you find?"

"Well..."

The muscles in Lumine's jaw worked for a moment, and he could see her analysis process in her mind. Her eyebrows knit in the same way that they had the night before, when she'd been feeling for the invisible boundary while asking Xiao for answers.

He folded his arms tightly.

"We actually got these items from a yaksha, or what was probably the whisper or memory of a yaksha," Lumine said, quick and soft, using the very vocabulary that he had taught her. "His name was Pervases in life, and he said hi."

Pervases.

A wave of guilt crashed hard into Xiao's chest, and he almost coughed. "How..." The words died in his throat. He hissed and tried again. "How? It's been centuries..."

"I don't know, Xiao, there's so little about this world that I actually understand." Lumine took a step backwards, giving Xiao a little more space, and Paimon flew to hide behind her. "Apparently he did a ritual called Mortal Linger that allowed us to see this illusion for just a little while, and he disappeared after he gave us these items. I guess... Today is the anniversary of his death, and maybe... Somehow, that allowed him a wish?" Lumine spread her hands helplessly. "I don't know, and I don't know if he fully knew himself, either. He knew we were going to do the Dream Trawler, and he gave us the items to do it."

Pervases. My brother.

Xiao closed his eyes.

He'd known that it wasn't impossible for the dead or defeated to draw their consciousness back together. Logically, of all of his family that had passed or disappeared, Pervases had been the only one who hadn't been totally obliterated at the personal physical hand of someone who tore his soul apart. It made sense that the yaksha who died in a rockslide, with no malintent at all, would manage to bring his soul back for just a glimpse of time.

The rocky, whirling wave in Xiao's chest exploded, and he coughed aloud, bringing his hands to his face.

Why couldn't he have gotten the chance to speak with the shade? Why couldn't he have made sure that Pervases was well, ensured that he wasn't restless, and asked him for his forgiveness, or told him about Qiqi and the sacrifice that was not at all for nothing? Why did Pervases have to appear to the Traveler but not to him?

Another day, another mystery, another piece of him that he had put behind him and was then made to remember.

"Xiao." Lumine's voice cut through Xiao's regret.

His hands balled into fists, breaking the red welts that had just started to heal on his palms. He

braced himself and waited for her to say she was sorry, to look at him with all that pity, or ask him if he was okay when he *so clearly wasn't*, and everything with her would be just like it was with everyone else...

He looked up when a minute passed and she still hadn't said anything.

Her face was impassive, and she stared back at Xiao without a single hint of pity or sadness at all. "The ritual? The mission?" She reminded him.

Xiao's focus came back to the task at hand.

Right. Pervases must have wanted for Lumine and Paimon to be able to achieve this ritual, or he wouldn't have given them the items. Pervases had always had the best nature of the yakshas, selfless and kind even on the worst of days, even when he learned that Xiao was a filthy dream addict. He had known that Xiao could eat dreams without performing the ritual in its ceremonial entirety; he must have known now that Lumine would be doing the Dream Trawler instead of Xiao.

Wonderful, generous, sympathetic Pervases. Xiao offered him a silent prayer: *Be at peace, my brother.*

He held the silence for another moment before turning to the censer, where Lumine had arranged the lamps in a circle and placed the bowl of mist flowers in the center. "Right. The Dream Trawler has four steps that I will trouble you with carrying out. Since you have met the person whose shade we are summoning, the ritual will work best for you. There are four steps to this: the offering of incense, meditation, and incantation." He gestured towards the statues that flanked either side of them. "Then, since you are not a yaksha or a divinity, you will shoot an arrow at the statues in order to enlist their authority for this ritual."

"Doesn't *your* authority work, Xiao?" Paimon asked suspiciously.

Xiao just stared at her. *I don't want my energy associated with the Dream Trawler anymore*, he could have said. *I used to be able to simply meditate and draw forth dreams, and I probably still could if I had the self-control to try*, he could have said. "I don't have to explain anything to you," he said instead, voice flat and dry, and Paimon quieted.

Lumine procured a bow and arrow. Of course she was able to shoot as well as swordfight. "I'll shoot the arrow, Xiao, but you can't possibly know for sure that I'm not divine," she quipped, grinning a little for the first time since the night started, and the heavy atmosphere lightened.

Xiao raised and lowered one shoulder. "We're assuming that you're not divine. No one actually knows what you are."

"It all just sounds like a whole lotta work," Paimon pouted. "Four steps? What a rigamarole."

"*Paimon!*" Lumine exclaimed at the fairy. "Shut up!"

Xiao stared at Paimon, who immediately froze in terror, hovering motionless in the air when his cold gaze met her wide and dark eyes. "This kind of art is the product of *thousands* of years of research by adepts, and you're going to call it 'rigamarole?'"

The icy venom in his voice was tangible, and Paimon shivered.

"Just so you know," he continued, "if you do not take this ritual seriously, the Dream Trawler will wreck your body and sunder your spirit from your flesh. You will die the most painful death, and karma will not be kind to you for your disrespect."

“Ahhh!” Paimon cried, shaking her little fists. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I respect you!” She closed her eyes and bowed her head, lacing her fingers together. “Paimon’s sorry! I’ll be quiet, I promise!”

Lumine made a soft *kmf* sound. Xiao turned to look at her, fully prepared to snap at her — but she shook her head. “That’s what you get, Paimon! Have some respect.”

Xiao blinked. *She’s on my side. She’s not mad at me for scaring Paimon.*

Huh.

He liked her better this way, joking instead of cautiously stoic, even if it was a little bit at his expense. At least for a second, his mood lifted, and he could imagine the pleasantries that Pervases would have wanted from him.

Lumine met his gaze and shrugged, smiling. “I just want to quickly make sure I have this right,” she said, spinning the arrow over her thumb. “Incense, meditation, incantation, arrow. Anything else?”

“Oh. Mm...” Xiao sighed. Adepti enchantment had never really been his point of strength, and even if he remembered the gist of the incantations, he couldn’t really remember it all word for word. For a moment, he wished for Somnius. Today was just full of him not being as good as his fellow yakshas would have been. “Light the incense in the censer, then meditate with thoughts on the target of the Dream Trawler, then say loudly, “Devayaksha, Bring Forth Sin” before shooting the arrow into the yaksha statues.”

That felt right.

He watched as Lumine stepped up to the censer with the incense outstretched in her fingers, closing her eyes in quiet meditation and concentration. The sweet-smelling smoke wafted gently out from the censer, filling the cool, crisp air with the warm aroma. Lumine exhaled deeply into her meditation, face serious and respectful.

It was nice to see someone take such an archaic ritual so seriously. Incense hadn’t been offered in Xiao’s presence in eons, and Lumine did it with such grace and consideration that Xiao couldn’t look away.

Of *course* Pervases had appeared to her. Her presence was welcoming and comforting and powerful, and yet she would defer and bow and offer respect in ways that even the spirits would not resist. She noticed things about the world that everyone else overlooked. Why shouldn’t she accept the visitation of a shade?

He was so lost in thought that he visibly startled when Lumine spoke the incantation in a loud, clear voice: “*Devayaksha, Bring Forth Sin!*”

She nocked an arrow into her bow with an easy motion with no extra movement or fumbling. Her hunter’s bow was equally as horrible as her dull blade, unpolished and unused and still somehow on the verge of splinters, but with Lumine’s determined focus the arrows she shot flew straight into her targets at the yaksha statues.

The air glowed brightly before condensing into the shade of a crouching, average-looking Liyuen man in front of them, standing up slowly.

Shit. Xiao bit his lip, hard. Muscle memory prompted him to reach out and rend the soul and destroy the body, *I want his dreams, I want them—*

“That’s the scamming, lying, no-good son of a bitch,” Lumine whispered to Xiao, immediately both grounding him and jolting him out of his thoughts. “That’s him.”

The shade stirred, steadying on his feet. “What happened? Where is one?” His face was hidden behind a painted dark green and gold mask that looked like it was made out of paper pulp, complete with a lumpy sculpted nose and a tall, unsettling grin; a truly poor knock-off of the beautiful ceramic and gold lacquer hanging at Xiao’s side. The shade groaned behind the mask and looked up at Lumine and Paimon. “You two..? What did you do to one’s body? One feels... strange and weightless!”

Lumine took an angry step forward before Xiao could speak, putting a false air of importance into her voice. “We summoned your spirit forth with an adepti art, Starschmucker.”

“*An adepti art?*” The shade laughed, pompous to the point of embarrassment. “You dare don the guise of an adeptus in one’s presence?!”

“Who’s donning what, exactly?” Lumine put her hands on her hips. “If you’re an adeptus, can you tell us where you are?”

Starsnatcher, or whoever he was, scratched the back of his neck. “One could have sworn that one was dozing off to sleep at Wangshu Inn...” he muttered uncertainly.

“Well, guess what?” Lumine leaned forward, jeering. “You’re already dead.”

Ha. Xiao couldn’t help it; he shook his head and chuckled, incredulous. Lumine really was something else.

“Dead? Impossible! One was just... lying in peaceful repose at Wangshu Inn.”

“Oh? Really? I thought that adepti don’t sleep,” Lumine’s lip curled in a smirk.

“One said *peaceful repose!*”

“Sounds like sleeping to me.”

“Wait! That must be it!” Starsnatcher’s voice pitched up, as if he really thought he had pulled one over on Lumine. “One is indeed dreaming! As expected of an adeptus, such as oneself! Hahaha!”

Lumine sighed and smacked her palm into her forehead with an audible slap as the shade laughed heartily, still somehow believing in his own ability. Her yellow eyes rolled over to look at Xiao. “Permission to beat the snot out of him? No killing, I promise.”

Xiao almost laughed again at how hopeful she sounded. “Permission granted.”

“Thank you!” Lumine summoned her crappy sword and immediately lunged at the man, striking him with the flat of her blade across the shoulders.

“*Ow!*” The shade yelped indignantly. “Do you truly think that one will permit such insolence in one’s own dreams?!”

It was hard to watch with a straight face. Xiao lifted his eyebrows as Lumine very skillfully rapped the shade sharply with the flat of the blade, never cutting the man or drawing blood on his soul, but keeping him off guard and definitely delivering welts and bruises with every *thwacking* impact amid little shouts of “hey!” and “hey, stop it!” and “*ow!*” The indignance in the man’s voice swiftly changed into confusion, and then into fear as each hit landed.

"I surrender!" the man finally cried, pathetic as he fell to his knees. "Please stop! *I surrender! I surrender!*"

Lumine's sword arm stilled. "Are you gonna behave?"

He groaned again, rubbing his shoulder furiously. "Yes! Yes, I will! I thought I was going to die!"

Lumine dismissed her sword and planted her hand on her hip again. "Are you still gonna try and pull that 'oneself' bullshit?"

"No! No, no, never again!" He was still rubbing his shoulder, loudly sniffing back embarrassed tears like a child. "You... You almost *killed* me!"

"Pft." Lumine rolled her eyes all the way up into her head. "You're being dramatic. If I *wanted* to kill you, you'd be dead."

Xiao smiled behind his hand.

"SPARE ME!" The man pleaded, crawling towards Lumine, who scooted backwards in revulsion. "I won't do this again! I swear it! Please, great adepti, spare my life!"

"Hilarious." Lumine folded her arms, and Paimon copied her over her shoulder. From the shade's perspective on the ground, they must have looked imposing, and he flinched again and covered his head with his hands. "I might have called your spirit here, but I'm not an adeptus." Lumine jerked her thumb in Xiao's direction. "He is, though."

For the first time, the shade of the Starsnatcher looked directly at Xiao.

Xiao could almost smell the tears and mucus and sweat of the man's body, even just through the metaphysical shade in front of him. "You deceive the masses with quackery, masquerade as an adeptus, exorcise demons without exterminating them, and display a callous lack of regard for life," he spat, words rolling off his tongue in accordance to how he thought that Rex Lapis or even Cloud Retainer might deliver such an accusation. "You have blasphemed every divinity that your land stands for, and poisoned your fellow humans against themselves."

The shade scrabbled at the dirt, trying to find enough purchase to push himself upright, but Lumine knocked his hand out from under him with a sweep of her foot, and the man stayed meekly on the ground.

Sick pleasure at his distress pooled in Xiao's chest, hot and savage. "One day, karma will come to you, and you will reap that which you have sown. For those who invite the infernal into their lives, *there is no redemption.*"

For a moment, there was only the thick scent of the man's embarrassment and guilt and panic in the mist flower-chilled air, louder and more tangible than Paimon's quiet *ooooo* of fearful admiration or Lumine's sweetly grim satisfaction.

Then the shade fell forward, prostrating against the dirt at Xiao's feet.

Xiao blinked rapidly. Paimon gasped. Lumine shook her head and mumbled, "wot?"

"O great adeptus," the man muffled into his mask and the dirt. "Please have mercy on me and heed my humble request, for I am not worthy... Might I ask your name?"

My name?

“Heh.” Lumine smirked, but she looked at Xiao with a veneration that was almost fond. “He is the Conqueror of Demons, the Vigilant Yaksha.”

“It’s really you!” The man lifted his face — still masked for some reason — and gazed up at Xiao. “You, you! Never in my life did I think that I would get to meet the Conqueror of Demons, the Vigilant Yaksha himself!”

A new emotion filled the air. Admiration, joy, and something that Xiao could only label as *obsession* mixed with the existing fear and assaulted his senses, and he almost doubled over in nausea. The Starsnatcher’s desire to form a connection with Xiao stank like sulfur. He wanted to be someone special to Xiao, as long as it meant that he would have the ability to exercise any kind of control over him. The terrible thought crossed Xiao’s mind that this human, this scammer, this *disgusting fraud*, wanted to *own* him.

Oh, I hate this.

Xiao folded his arms tightly across his chest and closed his eyes, forcing down the unease slowly circling his neck.

“My grandfather was a folklorist! I learned the tales of you as a child! I still collect all of the books about the yakshas to this day... I found out that my grandfather owned a sigil of permission, and at first I was only imitating the adepti for fun...” The man’s revolting voice trailed off.

“Ew.” Lumine muttered.

“Huh,” Paimon huffed. “Are you trying to say you’re Xiao’s biggest fan, or something?”

“Yes!” The man blessedly turned to address Lumine. “Thank you for allowing me to witness him in the flesh! It’s like a dream come true!”

A dream come true? Xiao could feel his eyelids retreating into his skull. If there was any instant cure for a recovering dream addict, it would be the dreams of this man. Xiao didn’t want to know, didn’t want to see, didn’t want to experience even a second of what this guy dreamed about. *Ew, indeed.*

“What? Don’t thank me, weirdo, I didn’t *allow* you to do anything.” Lumine clicked her tongue against her teeth, an irritated sound that made Xiao feel a little better. “Say what you need to say and you can go.”

“Oh... Y-yes.” The man faltered, falling back towards Xiao. “O Great Conqueror of Demons, please allow me to swear this oath before you! I will turn away from the evil, live an honest life, and never again stain from the name of the adepti!”

Lumine snickered quietly. “*‘From the evil?’ ‘Stain from the name?’ Sure, dude.*”

Xiao didn’t move. “I will remember your oath. Now go.”

“Thank you!” The shade called out, even as he faded into the air. “Thank you a thousand times for your forgiveness, and for all that you have done for Liyue!”

The last of the bluish glow faded.

It was odd. Xiao had spent the last centuries knowing that he would never really be thanked or acknowledged for the invisible battle he fought every night, and now that someone actually thanked him for it, he didn’t want it. Why did the past become more vivid and more relevant with

time? He was better off being bored and caught in endless battle than facing his memories of the past. He rolled his shoulders, shaking the sticky, prickly feeling from his skin, weird desire and uncomfortable obsession...

“So, that took a weird turn,” Lumine commented, breaking the silence. “I have no patience for self-proclaimed *Number One Fans*. I met this one creep in Mondstadt who doesn’t leave my friend alone to the point of stalker behavior, and she’s just too nice to tell him off directly. He smelled her hair once, and that was the end of the rope for me.”

“Oh, are you talking about Barbara?” Paimon sighed.

“Yeah, and creepy Albert.” Lumine scowled at the place where the man’s shade had disappeared. “She’s too nice. Being a deaconess and a good person doesn’t mean you have to put up with people who borderline harass you.” She looked sideways at Xiao. “... But I don’t have to worry about that for you, right?”

Paimon laughed as Xiao shrugged. “Xiao can take care of himself! Starspitter won’t be tricking anyone anymore, not if he doesn’t want you two to come back again!”

Xiao’s body remained completely motionless. He opened his eyes to half-mast, tired and burning under his eyelids, fighting to keep his thoughts from causing him to dissociate...

Lumine was looking right at him.

The atmosphere shifted slightly. “Hey,” she said, “we totally forgot to get the Sigil of Permission. Paimon and I can go ask Verr Goldet about it, and we can meet you at the inn tomorrow so you don’t have to sacrifice any more time tonight. Would that be something you’re okay with?”

“You...” Xiao blinked and cleared his throat, then cleared it again. “You don’t have to do that. I’ve asked for enough from you.”

“Nah, I want to see this through.” Lumine smiled that mischievous smile of hers. “Do what you have to do, and we’ll see you tomorrow.”

“*Today*,” Paimon corrected obnoxiously. “It’s past midnight, so we’ll see you today.”

Xiao and Lumine sighed at the same time.

“Whatever, you little rat.” Lumine poked Paimon playfully, and the fairy shrieked. “Good night, Xiao. See you in a few.”

“Okay.” Xiao watched as Lumine waved. She and Paimon disappeared on the spot, presumably to teleport to Wangshu Inn.

In just a few words, in just a few interactions, Lumine was able to make him feel better. When she spoke to him, it seemed like she understood him, knew how to navigate more difficult topics or divert his attention, like she really *saw* him in a way that didn’t make him feel vulnerable or naked or uncomfortably self-conscious.

Too bad she couldn’t stop the spiral of thoughts that continued in her absence. The questions seemed to reverberate in Xiao’s skull as he mindlessly continued hunting down demons all over Liyue.

Why was she still around? What did she want from him? *What was she really after?* Anyone could see him and know that he was beautiful and powerful. He had been born for the *purpose* of being

beautiful and powerful. Even the scum of the earth like Osial and Kimaris and dirty humans like the Starsnatcher would look at him and recognize this, and even people who loved him, like Zhongli and Pervases, acknowledged these qualities.

So what did Lumine, a traveler with a purpose, strong enough to fight literally anything with a dull blade and wield at least two elements, want from Xiao?

All this time spent with the Traveler was confusing him and making him more uncertain and triggered than ever. She'd gotten him to join her on this journey to punish a Liyuen scammer, and for what? Ganyu had said that she liked him, but that couldn't be true. There was always some ulterior motive, something else causing Xiao to have any value at all as a weapon that happened to be easy on the eyes. Even his jade spear was, by definition, a beautiful weapon.

It was fine. *It's fine.* That was all he had to be, and that was all that the Traveler had to see him as. They didn't have to be friends. They didn't have to be companions. They didn't have to be anything.

He sighed and pushed away the desire to eat an Abyss mage's dream as he pulled his spear from its disintegrating form, feeling the strain of karma on his body stronger than ever in that endless night.

See me as a weapon, and nothing else.

Chapter End Notes

I'LL BE TAKING A BREAK FOR JUNE BUT I'LL BE RIGHT BACK AND I HAVE AMAZING THINGS PLANNED, THANK YOU FOR READING!

Translation:

"I cannot speak Liyuen (Chinese)."

"But it sounds like you can."

"I really cannot."

"You speak lies."

"What does that mean?"

"I called you a liar."

"... You're a bad egg."

"The day before yesterday you said I was a good egg."

"I thought you said good egg wasn't a real term."

"You can't have it both ways."

"... fine."

坏蛋 (huaidan): "bad egg;" usually said to a misbehaving child

乖蛋 (guaidan): "well-behaved egg." not a real thing. If you try to use it as a term, people will laugh at you.

Mondstadt: "moon city" in German xD

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Changing

Chapter Summary

Zhongli nodded. “You enjoy spending time with her.”

Eugh. Xiao cringed at that. “I... do not find her presence objectionable.”

“She finds your presence worthwhile.”

“That’s because she doesn’t know me.”

“It sounds like you haven’t given her the opportunity to know you.”

“You sound like Guizhong.”

“That’s entirely a compliment to me!”

“I know.” Xiao tapped the roof tile with his fingertips, hard enough that his nails clicked the tile through his gloves. “I don’t know if I want to give her the opportunity. She has enough to think about without my life story adding to her concerns.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Dawn had just barely touched the horizon when Xiao returned to Wangshu Inn, teleporting mostly effortlessly, blinking his eyes open with a soft exhale.

“Good morning.” Zhongli was waiting for him on the balcony.

Xiao jumped back, fingers twitching for his spear. “Oh! Good morning, my Lord.” He spread his hand open wide at his side. “I wasn’t expecting you. Am I late for something?”

“Not at all.” Zhongli moved to sit on the roof tiles and started to prepare a pot of mint tea on a tray that he must have brought. He was probably the only being in existence that could make tea on an unsteady rooftop seem so graceful. “I just decided to meet you early here. I apologize for startling you.”

“It’s nothing.” He sat down, less gracefully, and folded his legs under himself. “Did something happen at Mount Aocang?”

“Mmm... Not in particular. Do you know Shenhe?”

Xiao thought for a moment. “I’ve heard the name. I don’t remember a face or interaction.”

Zhongli nodded. “She’s Cloud Retainer’s human apprentice, and she’s recently been trying to exit the adept realms and reconnect to human life. You may have met her once or twice, but we have no real connection to her, and she has no knowledge of my identity. I figured that you would rather meet with me here than risk the pressure of meeting and remembering another face.”

Ah. “I appreciate that.”

Zhongli's amber eyes flickered, and he looked sideways at Xiao. "Why do you ask? Is it a bad time? Are you expecting someone?"

"No. I always have time for you." Xiao inhaled deeply; the smell of mint, sweet and clean and refreshing, cooled the space behind his temples. "Thank you for the tea."

"Of course."

Zhongli held out a china cup, and Xiao accepted it with both hands. The liquid was pleasantly warm and left a cool tingle on Xiao's tongue when he sipped it. His grimmer thoughts from the hours before seemed less serious in the easy presence of Zhongli.

"Are you doing alright?" Zhongli asked, the way he had for centuries.

"I'm surviving," Xiao answered, the way he had for centuries.

"Just surviving?" Zhongli pressed, raising his eyebrows as he lowered his teacup. "What have you been up to?"

"Mmmm..." He actually had an adventure worth sharing about. It had been a long time. "Last night, Lumine and I delivered consequences to a human masquerading as an adeptus."

Zhongli's eyes widened at "Lumine" and narrowed at "human." He took another sip of tea before responding, slowly. "Interesting. How... How did you go about doing that?"

Oh.

Shit.

The words *Dream Trawler* froze in Xiao's throat.

"Did you summon a human shade?" Zhongli asked lightly.

Xiao coughed. "Yes, but I didn't eat his dreams. Really."

"That's good to hear!" Zhongli picked up the teapot and refilled Xiao's cup. "Did you perform the ritual in front of Lumine?"

"No, Lumine actually did it herself."

Zhongli's hand froze in the air, and he stared at Xiao. "She *did*?"

"Yes!"

There was something strangely satisfying about surprising Zhongli like this. Xiao had never seen his archon react like this on behalf of a human.

He cracked a small smile. "She completed the ritual, and she did very well. She was respectful and focused. Even while delivering retribution to the shade, she was careful not to hurt him more than he could handle."

Zhongli nodded, steadying his hand enough to put the teapot back down. "You enjoy spending time with her."

Eugh. Xiao cringed at that. "I... do not find her presence objectionable."

“She finds your presence worthwhile.”

“That’s because she doesn’t know me.”

“It sounds like you haven’t given her the opportunity to know you.”

“You sound like Guizhong.”

“That’s entirely a compliment to me!”

“I know.” Xiao tapped the roof tile with his fingertips, hard enough that his nails clicked the tile through his gloves. “I don’t know if I want to give her the opportunity. She has enough to think about without my life story adding to her concerns.”

Zhongli sipped his tea thoughtfully. “Do you remember that I told you once, centuries ago, that your trauma doesn’t disappear just because you’re tired of it?”

Xiao sighed. “Vaguely. I remember the message, if not the words.”

“I can say it again.” Zhongli smiled softly. “Your trauma doesn’t disappear just because you’re tired of it, but how you choose to respond to it is up to you.” He leaned forward slightly, drawing Xiao’s undivided attention. “Do you know what exactly you want from her presence in your life?”

Not at all. She is a constant source of confusion in my life.

No one knows everything about me.

Not even you, Rex Lapis.

“No,” Xiao answered honestly. “I don’t want her to know me.”

Zhongli’s intense gaze never wavered. “Why not?”

Xiao blinked awkwardly.

Memories of Lumine — swirling through the air, sending out whirlwinds and meteorites, laughing but never at Xiao, sitting on the floor learning Liyuen, fighting for the honor of the yakshas despite having no connection to them — all shot through Xiao’s mind like a lightning strike.

Why not?

Zhongli smiled deeper upon seeing the question swirling behind Xiao’s eyes. “You don’t have to know right now, or any time at all, really. But I hope you think about it. Lumine has proven to be the catalyst for change in the entire history of Teyvat, and I believe she could be a catalyst for change in you, too.” He turned his empty cup upside down on the tray. “Someone in the city told me the other day, ‘hopefully, everyone can meet the Right Person.’”

Xiao shook his head and wrinkled his nose, clearing the visuals from the screen behind his eyelids. *Not right now.* “Who said it, and what qualifies them to say it?”

“The half-qilin lawyer in Liyue Harbor,” Zhongli answered simply. “I don’t know if you remember the xiezhi adepti that fought alongside us during the Archon War, but one of them married a human and went off with her to travel the world. His daughter, Yanfei, is the leading legal advisor in the city. I work with her from time to time at the funeral parlor.”

“A lawyer is the ruling authority on fatal soulmates?” Xiao raised one eyebrow.

“Oh, I don’t believe in soulmates by fate.”

“Don’t you?”

Zhongli took Xiao’s finished cup and turned it over on the tea tray. His silver emperor ring clinked gently against the china. “I would never do Guizhong the dishonor of saying that the work she put into our relationship was only made possible by *fate*. As if we did not make an intentional choice to love each other. As if the *universe* is the only reason she had the patience to put up with me, and not her own will.”

Xiao couldn’t think of a sufficient answer. “Oh.”

“That doesn’t mean I don’t agree with Yanfei, though.” Zhongli waved his hand, and the tea tray disappeared. “There can be the best possible choice in person suitable for an individual at any given time, and I suppose it isn’t completely wrong for her to use the title ‘the Right Person.’”

“I cannot possibly be the best choice for anyone,” Xiao murmured.

“If I can breach a sensitive topic,” Zhongli said gently, “at one point, you at least made an effort to let Ganyu know you.”

Xiao huffed softly through his nose. “Things were different then.”

“And things are different now, too!” Zhongli smiled. “Lumine is turning Teyvat upside down. She is more on your level of existence than anyone else is, even Ganyu or Shenhe. She’s not human. Beyond that, Xiao, she wants to know you. Anyone could have taught her how to speak Liyuen, and she chose you! Many would have jumped at the opportunity. Yanfei surely would have.”

“Mm.”

Zhongli seemed to realize he was getting a little too excited, and drew back a little bit. “The real question is whether or not you even like her as a person. There is nothing to be said if you do not.”

Xiao raised and lowered one shoulder. “Honestly, my Lord, I don’t know what it means or how it feels to like someone. Even if I did, she just disappeared for all of last week without telling you or me anything. That probably means I wasn’t a priority to her anyway.”

“Well, for all you know, she needs a friend right now,” Zhongli said mildly.

Xiao glanced up. “What do you mean?”

Zhongli let out a short sigh. “My understanding is that she saw her brother in Mondstadt, and their interaction did not go well. I’ve heard through the grapevine that her brother is now leading the Abyss.”

That was way too much information all at once. “Hah?”

“Like I said.” Zhongli turned the ring on his left hand. “She might need a friend right now. Maybe before you let her get to know you, you can listen and see if you can get to know *her*.”

Oh.

Lumine had definitely made herself available to Xiao, but he couldn’t really remember any moment that she had actually tried to tell him about herself. During one of their first conversations, she had told him to ask her questions, but he couldn’t remember asking her anything with an open answer,

and he couldn't remember having any desire to ask her anything, either.

Oh.

Am I selfish?

A line formed between Xiao's eyebrows, and he was just about to ask Zhongli aloud when an intensely radiant personality in the form of a young lady with a porkpie hat barrelled up the stairs and onto the balcony, jumping up two steps at a time.

"Zhongli, are you up here?!" She yelled, spinning in place before spotting and pointing at her target. "Aha, there you are!"

The unspoken question died between Xiao's lips.

"Hu Tao, what are you doing?" Zhongli asked firmly, unmoving from his spot on the roof.

"Yoh!" The young lady tipped her hat slightly. "I was looking for you, Zhongli! People said they saw you here! C'mon, it's time to get to work."

Hu Tao. Xiao remembered her name. This lady, a Pyro user, was Zhongli's boss from the funeral parlor. She smelled like flowers, chilies, and death, though Xiao could also smell a hint of seafood-sweetness. She seemed nice, and Xiao probably would have liked her more if she hadn't just hightailed without permission onto his balcony and spoken to Zhongli so informally.

Please leave.

"Why would you come all the way out here just to look for me?" Zhongli sighed, just a hint of weariness under his voice. "I have never once been late to the Wangsheng Funeral Parlor."

"I also needed some silk flowers, so I was just gonna get them myself." She pointed to the left side of her hat, where she had arranged some of the pink flowers around the brim.

The innkeeper, Huai'an, ran up the stairs and appeared behind her, slightly out of breath. "Miss Hu Tao, you really can't come up here!" He looked quickly at Xiao and Zhongli still sitting on the roof tiles. "I apologize! I couldn't stop her, she just ran past me! Forgive us for not being more careful."

Xiao shook his head, and Zhongli raised a hand. "Don't apologize. Thank you for your efforts, Huai'an. You can go."

Hu Tao grinned innocently at the innkeeper as he turned to go down the stairs. "Sorry for that~!"

Zhongli frowned at her. "Child, I will go to work when it is time for work."

"Yeah, yeah, but it's going to rain today, and now I get to have you help me carry silk flowers on the walk back to the city." She beamed, wheedling.

Zhongli closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Fine."

Hu Tao seemed to really notice Xiao for the first time, and she waved. "Hi there!"

Xiao inclined his head back at her. "Mm."

"I'm Hu Tao. Hu as in, 'Who put me in this coffin?' and Tao as in, 'I can't get out!' Haha!" She smiled brightly at him. "Get it?"

Zhongli buried his face in his hands.

The ghost of a laugh escaped through Xiao's nose, and he turned to hide a smile. Xiao could tell Zhongli was feeling a combination of exasperation and resigned fondness, and he almost felt a little bit of the same. Hu Tao was assertive, for sure, but she was also one of the least aggressive Pyro users he'd ever met. She was amusing. "Hi," he said softly, polite but uninviting to any further conversation.

"For future reference, please avoid going into any other places that are obviously restricted," Zhongli told Hu Tao firmly. "You might be an allogene, but there are secrets and dangers that you could not dream of facing."

Hu Tao made a face. "Only dusty old people call Vision users *allogenes*. You're exposing yourself by calling anyone that, old man."

"Don't—" Zhongli sighed. "Would you please give me a moment? Go wait downstairs."

"O-kay," Hu Tao singsonged, looking upwards and away in an exaggerated manner. "I don't know what the big *deal* is with the restricted signs *anyway*. There's nothing of notice up here. Not at *all*."

Xiao squinted as Hu Tao descended the stairs, all while humming softly and looking anywhere but directly at them. "What is she talking about?"

Zhongli chuckled and shook his head. "She's making the point that she won't say anything about the top floor of the Inn. She won't tell anyone anything about you."

Oh. "That's very good of her." Xiao leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees and resting his chin on his hands. "I can see why you might enjoy working for her."

"*Pft*. I cannot deal with that child," Zhongli remarked flatly, though he smiled as he said it. "If I may, Xiao, I think the fact that you didn't just throw Hu Tao over the edge of the balcony on sight speaks wonders to how much you have changed in the past few months. I have changed too, and I know you can see the ways in which I have picked up the manner of a human, but your temperament in general has changed."

Huh. He hadn't thought about that.

He hadn't attacked Hu Tao immediately, or even flinched away from her intrusion. He'd been a little irritated, sure, but not instinctively angry or fearfully paralyzed. He'd even found her funny.

Just last night he'd been practically crippled by memories of the past, and yet at this moment, he'd been able to adapt and tolerate the trespassing presence of a *Pyro-wielding stranger*.

Xiao let his eyes fall shut. He had a lot to process.

"I don't want any of this to seem as though I am pressuring you to make one decision or another, but I would be lying if I said I wasn't rooting for you to find someone that you *can* tell all your secrets to, even if that person is not me." Zhongli stood and straightened the lapels of his coat. "Will you think about what we've said today?"

Xiao nodded without opening his eyes. "I will."

"Xiao."

He looked back up at Zhongli, standing over him with all the authority of an archon. “Yes?”

Zhongli’s amber eyes were hard and sincere, and he folded his arms across his chest. “Believe me when I say this. Everything that you need has been given to you. Everything you need to be, you have become, all on your own. You are not difficult. You are not a burden. You deserve to live, and not just to survive. Do you believe me?”

Do I?

Things were different now. Xiao was different. His *archon* was different. Liyue, Teyvat, even the place that he called home; everything had changed, and Xiao had always thought he was staying the same. He’d tried for so long to keep himself always ready for disappointment, always ready to be alone, always bracing himself for the next horrible loss or emotional takedown that pushed the limits of his sanity, that he had never wondered or given life the chance to prove him wrong. It wasn’t as though life had given him a reason to hope.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

“I only promise to try,” he answered Zhongli as honestly as he could.

We’ll see.

Chapter End Notes

[Lol Yanfei has a crush on Traveler](#), everyone in Genshin is bi change my mind

It's good to be back <3

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Invitation to Mundane Life, Part 1

Chapter Summary

“Grilled tiger fish?” Lumine raised one eyebrow, more out of concern than out of fun.
“No almond tofu today?”

Xiao coughed again and cast his eyes to the side. *I’m trying something.* “Tiger fish was Pervases’s favorite food. I just...” *Inhale.* “I just wanted to taste it.” *Exhale.*

A look of understanding crossed Lumine’s face, and her expression softened. “You haven’t tasted it before?”

He shook his head no. *I don’t want to talk about this yet.*

Chapter Notes

tw; PTSD symptoms, flashbacks, mention of gaslighting/manipulation

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

When Lumine came to find Xiao later in the morning, he was sitting at a table far out of the way of any foot traffic, just outside the kitchen of the inn. She waved when she saw him and slid into the chair across the table from him.

“Good morning!” She folded her arms on the table and looked up at him. “I didn’t think I would ever see you down here.”

“Good morning.” He nodded once. “I’m... trying something new.”

“I support that.”

Xiao clenched and relaxed his jaw. *Try.* “I have a question.”

“Yeah?”

“Where does Paimon go when she’s not with you?”

Lumine smiled sideways, the way she did. “Sometimes she goes to hang out with Xiangling, this cook in the city, and sometimes she goes and hangs out in my serenitea pot. She likes it better out here, though. She has to make her own food in the pot.”

Xiao blinked. “Your... what?”

“My serenitea pot. My adeptus abode? I have an adeptus abode. Madame Ping gave it to me.” She cocked her head and stared at him. “Is that bad?”

He shook his head incredulously. “What even are you? How do you have your own domain? *I*

don't even have my own domain."

Lumine snorted and waved her hand dismissively. "I get the feeling that you don't have one because you don't *want* one. If you wanted one, I'm sure you could have one."

"Maybe." Xiao would definitely never figure her out. Maybe no one ever would. "It's insane to me that you are not an adeptus, or even a spellcaster of any kind, and you still have an adeptus abode."

She shrugged in response. "It was a gift, and I don't really turn down gifts. You should come see it sometime! I think it's pretty great. I'm no interior designer, so there's lots of open space." She tapped her fingers on the table and looked at him through her eyelashes. "But you like open space."

A corner of Xiao's mouth lifted, just a little bit. "Mmhm."

A somewhat nervous-looking waitress stepped timidly up to the table just then. Her hands were laced together in front of her, and shaking just a little. She pushed her glasses up higher on her face, then quickly returned her hands to their original position. "May I take your order, sir?" She asked Xiao.

His eyebrows knit, and his mind immediately took off on a downward spiral. Why was she nervous? What had he done? *Is she afraid of me? I didn't think this through, I'm scaring the humans, I'm exposing the truth about the upstairs of the inn —*

"You're not Yuhua," Lumine remarked to the waitress. "Hi! I'm Lumine, but most people in Liyue know me as the Traveler. Are you new here?"

"Oh!" The waitress twirled her thumbs. "I am Yuhua's twin sister, Xiuhua. I've seen you in Liyue Harbor!"

"Oh, yeah, I know you!" Lumine grinned. "You work at Baiju Guesthouse. Nice to formally meet you! What are you doing here at Wangshu Inn?"

Xiao breathed a soft sigh of relief. Lumine knew everyone, and everyone was instantly comfortable around her. It was almost like her natural warmth canceled out Xiao's natural cold anxiety.

The waitress smiled shyly, pleased to have been recognized. Her nervousness cleared. "My sister and I switch places between the Inn and the Guesthouse from time to time, and I suppose today is my lucky day if I have the privilege of serving both the Traveler and the Conqueror of Demons." She fixed her hands more securely in front of her. "What can I get for you?"

"Just tea for me, thanks." Lumine looked over at Xiao.

He cleared his throat. "Grilled tiger fish."

The waitress nodded. "Coming right out." She smiled again before turning and disappearing into the kitchen.

"Grilled tiger fish?" Lumine raised one eyebrow, more out of concern than out of fun. "No almond tofu today?"

Xiao coughed again and cast his eyes to the side. *I'm trying something.* "Tiger fish was Pervases's favorite food. I just..." *Inhale.* "I just wanted to taste it." *Exhale.*

A look of understanding crossed Lumine's face, and her expression softened. "You haven't tasted

it before?”

He shook his head no. *I don't want to talk about this yet.*

“Okay. I'm sure it tastes amazing, if it was Pervases's favorite.” She turned towards her bag and rooted through it for a moment, pulling a folded piece of paper from it. “Speaking of last night... Starsnatcher wrote me a letter, and he left the Sigil of Permission with Verr Goldet. I guess he knew we'd come back here for it.” She separated the Sigil from the paper and slid it across the table to Xiao.

“Thank you.” He passed his hand over the golden seal, and it disappeared. “Hopefully there aren't any more of these around for any human to find.”

Lumine made a face. “I hope not.” She unfolded the paper in her hand. “So... Starsnatcher's real name is Wang Ping'an, which is a really boring name for such a giant douche.”

“Well.” Xiao rolled his eyes. “I don't think there's really a Liyuen translation for ‘giant douche.’”

“There *should* be.” She scanned the letter. “He's gone on a ‘journey of self-improvement,’ and he signed off with ‘Wang Ping'an, A Sinner,’ which is wildly dramatic and a little unnecessary, but he seems really sorry and sincere. I don't like the guy, but I'll admit, this is a beautifully written apology.” She turned the paper over. “There's one part here that I found interesting. I wanted to hear your thoughts on it.”

Hm. “Go ahead.”

Lumine shook the paper and started reading. “‘The Conqueror of Demons shouldered the desires of Liyue's people as he contended with demons. Wearing his mask, he concealed the weakness brought by human desire. As a false adeptus, I am one who always wears a mask. A true adeptus only need to wear it when facing demons. If I wear a mask to hide the evil that has corrupted my heart... Then the Conqueror of Demons wears a mask to hide the part of him that is human. And yet, he wears the face of a demon king only that he might subdue all demons.’” She folded the letter and put it down. “Is that accurate?”

Xiao looked down at the surface of the table, eyes tracking each line and whorl in the cuihua wood. “It's a little dramatic, as you said, but. I suppose it's not incorrect. I think he has mixed up the idea of an adeptus with the idea of a yaksha, but I understand the point he is making.” He shifted in his chair. “If I can compare weakness to being human, or power to being an adeptus, then it would make sense hiding my humanity would unleash my greater power.”

It would also make sense that if my mask was taken from me, then all I would have left is my weakness in human form.

He pressed his lips together tightly.

“Greater power...” Lumine repeated, musing. “I have to ask. Were you very close to Pervases?”

Archons.

The question struck Xiao through the temples like an arrow, and his shoulders tensed. “He was family to me, though I have to admit I spoke to him less than I could have. Not for any personal reason. But I just didn't talk to him alone very often.” The nerves behind his eyes strained. “Why do you ask?”

Lumine nodded slowly. “The last thing he said to me and Paimon was like a little rhythm, and part

of it made me think of you. He said, ‘by wave and storm I hunt for fish, by wind and snow I slay evil.’” She slightly raised and lowered her shoulders. “I got the feeling that when he said *wind*, he meant you.”

Wave and storm. That must have been Indarias and Bosacius, who would often get tiger fish with Pervases; *wind and snow* must have been himself and Antheas, the relatively aggressive warriors of the family. The faintest trace of a smile crossed Xiao’s lips. “Maybe. Was there any more to the rhythm?”

“I couldn’t hear,” she answered. “I don’t know.”

“That’s okay. Thank you.” He swallowed the lump that was starting to form in his throat. “Did he tell you anything else?”

She thought for a moment. “He told us how he gave up his life for Liyue. He said his strength failed and he died.” Lumine hesitated, and Xiao swallowed again. “Pervases said that even his death didn’t amount to anything compared to what you have gone through. He said that... his death was an escape, or a selfish indulgence. Like the easy way out of what you have suffered.”

Xiao squeezed his eyes shut tight.

It wasn’t fair for Pervases to judge himself this way, as if his sacrifice had been worthless, as if Qiqi’s life was not worth his time or his compassion, as if his family hadn’t loved him. He had been everything to a lot of people.

“I told him,” Lumine continued. “I told him that he shouldn’t be ashamed. I didn’t speak on your behalf or anything, but I’m *positive* that Liyue and Rex Lapis were grateful for his life. And part of me is very sure that you also don’t hold any grudge against Pervases.”

Not even a little bit. No part of me holds anything against Pervases. “Yes,” he managed to agree quietly. “You would be correct.”

He opened his eyes, and Lumine was smiling. “He sounded like he really looked up to you. Hopefully you’re able to get some closure with him.”

Xiao grimaced. Pervases would never get to know exactly what happened with Indarias and Bonanus after his death. He would not know that Bosacius disappeared shortly after that. And he wouldn’t know that the sheer suffering of being alive actually felt like for Xiao. Even spared all of this knowledge, he hadn’t been able to rest peacefully...

But then he thought of Qiqi, and how even though she couldn’t remember anything, she loved so fiercely and tried so hard; the determination in her face, the care in her small hands, and the neat, ancient handwriting in her notes that recorded everything that she wanted to remember.

Pervases wasn’t to blame for what happened to Xiao or the other yakshas, but he surely deserved credit for his bravery in the Archon War, his battle against demons in the aftermath, Qiqi’s life, and all the people she affected as a result. His life had been good. He’d been loved.

“I think so.” Xiao replied. “I hope so.”

Lumine smiled all the way up to her eyes, all sunbeams and light, and the hard line of his own lip softened.

Xiuhua the waitress returned with a pot of chrysanthemum tea and a plate of spicy-smelling fish. She gracefully set them down on the table and inclined her head with respect. “Please enjoy.”

“Thank you!” Lumine said brightly. The waitress went back to the kitchen, and Lumine busied herself pouring out the tea.

Xiao looked over the plate of fish. At its core, it was still just crispy fish cooked on a bamboo stick, but it was much more polished than what Indarias or Pervases would usually grill over fire. He picked up his chopsticks and nudged some of the scallions on the surface aside before breaking off the smallest piece of the tender fish.

The aroma was almost overwhelming, spicy and salty and sharp, and the flavor burst too bright and too much on Xiao’s tongue — but the flood of memories of sitting on the grass at Jueyan Karst with his family, this fishy smell in the air, even the sound of haircuts and laughter all emerged from the dark corners of Xiao’s brain, *I miss them, I miss this, this is good it’s GOOD* — before the meat turned to ash that stuck in his windpipe and turned his stomach over.

Damn. The memories faded out. Xiao swallowed the concrete in his mouth, Lumine filled a teacup for him, and he tapped his fingers on the table in thanks before downing the cup and pushing it out for more.

“Are you okay?” Lumine asked, blessedly not looking at him, keeping her eyes on the teapot. “How does it taste?”

“It’s good.” How fucking pathetic he was, to not even be able to stomach something that genuinely tasted very good. *Idiot.* He sucked down another cup of tea. “I think it’s too rich for me.”

“Can I try it?” She picked up her chopsticks and poised them over the fish.

“You can have the rest of it.” Xiao dropped his hands into his lap.

He’d tasted it. It was good. That was all he’d come to do, anyway.

“Hey.”

He looked up.

Lumine was staring at him with a mouthful of fish. She chewed for a second, maintaining increasingly unsettling eye contact before she swallowed. “Are you about to excuse yourself?”

What gave it away?

Her chopsticks clacked as she put them down on her plate. “Stay. Talk to me.”

He couldn’t help scowling. “Why?”

“Xiao.” Lumine leaned forward, putting herself into his line of vision. Her eyes were intensely sincere, shiny and impossible to ignore. “We’ve known each other for about half a year now, and I have called you a friend for at least four out of six of those months. Do you consider us friends?”

“Yes.” The word was out before he could think too hard about it, but Xiao knew it was the truth.

“So I’m your friend, and that means I want to hear the things that you have to say. Because I care about you.” She rested her chin in the palm of her hand. “I’ve read the fan fiction. I’ve heard from Ganyu, from Zhongli, and from Pervases. I’ve seen you take care of small children, both ghosts and humans, and I know from experience that you’re genuinely kind. So... If you would like to, *and only if you would like to*, would you tell me what the truth is?”

No. Xiao's face immediately pinched into a mixed expression, eyebrows drawn together defensively and lips pressed firmly together.

Why should he tell her anything? It would only drive her away from him. She'd know the truth and then she'd leave out of fear or disgust. He couldn't tell her anything.

It hit him all at once and out of nowhere.

That was the root of it, he finally realized, eyes widening by a microscopic margin.

I don't want her to go away.

Lumine didn't notice the lightning bolt of understanding that had hit Xiao, or the amount of cotton that seemed to have filled his skull in a matter of seconds.. "How about I tell you everything about me first, and then you can decide if you want to share back or not?" She drummed her fingers against the side of her face. "And then even if you decide that you don't want to tell me anything at all, I can tell you another little confession about me."

Don't go away.

"Okay," he managed to get out.

She smiled slightly, straightening up in her seat and placing her palms flat on the table. "My name is Lumine. I have a twin brother named Aether, who I thought had been missing for the past months. I *kind of* have amnesia. I have some memories of my childhood. Otherwise, the last thing I remember before waking up on a beach in Mondstadt and meeting Paimon is encountering some mysterious goddess and being separated from my brother. I have reason to believe he's now the Leader of the Abyss, whatever *that* means. I genuinely don't have any idea what that even means. I saw him last week, and he turned away from me and disappeared into a portal, as if he didn't care about me or see me at all. Like I meant nothing to him."

Here she stopped, staring very hard at the table.

"I haven't been able to stop thinking about him for the last week," she murmured. "And every time that I do, I doubt myself and my every action. Because why am I alive and here in Teyvat if I'm not looking for Aether? I don't know exactly what my goal is. I'm traveling aimlessly. I'm just a traveler, and I think I'm all out of tears to cry. I guess I just have to keep living until I can see him again. I guess." She took a deep wavering breath, as if bracing herself to cry, but when nothing happened she picked up her teacup and took a long sip.

Xiao remained motionless, some tingles of stress and tiredness crawling up the sides of his head. She had been going through all of this at the same time that she battled a dragon and saved Mondstadt, solved the mystery of Rex Lapis's 'death,' and made time to find justice for Liyuens who'd been scammed by a human, even though she got nothing out of it.

Lumine glanced at him over the top of her cup. "Do you think I'm pathetic?" She smiled ruefully. "I've got no home, family, or final destination. People accuse me of being a social climber, or being a slut, or blaspheming their gods, or of being uncaring or whatever. I've heard it all."

"You are *not* pathetic. And you're not any of those things," Xiao responded sharply, a little more defensive than he expected from himself. "Humans will tell terrible lies about the things that they don't understand, and I've lived long enough to know that you can't ever listen to their complaints. The people that actually know you will never think this way about you, because the people that know you will know the truth."

She smiled deeper, more genuinely. “Thanks for listening, and thanks for saying that,” she said. “It means a lot.”

“Of course.”

Lumine picked up the emptying teapot, pouring out the last of the liquid equally into their cups. She kept her eyes on the task at hand, even as she spoke: “Are you willing to share your truths with me?”

Somehow that part had slipped Xiao’s mind.

He clenched his fists hard, pressing nails into palms but not too hard. Not yet.

“It’s not that I’m unwilling,” he said, quiet enough that Lumine leaned forward to hear him better. “You won’t understand.”

She pushed the now-empty teapot to the side of the table. “Can you help me understand? What are you afraid is going to happen?”

He pressed the inside of his cheek between his teeth. “I don’t know. I’ve been through a lot of terrible things. I’ve done a lot of fucked-up things that I’m still paying for.”

“Hm,” Lumine hummed. “I hadn’t thought about if I’ve done any fucked-up shit. I have amnesia.”

“Lumine, *I am dead serious right now.*” Xiao stared uncharacteristically directly into her eyes, and she straightened up. “I mean, I have done a *lot of fucked-up shit*. I don’t have to defend myself or deny it, because *it is the truth*. I killed a lot of people. Good things don’t happen to me, and when they do, they always go away because of me.” He shook his head impatiently. “And even if the good things don’t go away, they’re different. When people know that you’ve been through hell, hell is all they can see when they look at you.”

I’m still broken, he didn’t say. *I’m still broken and I still haven’t moved past this thing that happened to me so long ago, and I haven’t let it go because I don’t know how to, I don’t know how, I don’t know.*

A tense quiet settled over their table. The half-eaten fish and two teacups full of chrysanthemum dregs stopped steaming.

Finally Lumine spoke. “Am I a ‘good thing’ to you?”

“Yes.” Xiao responded flatly.

She shook her head, sardonic. “Oh, I am far from good.”

“You’re better than me.”

“We don’t know that.”

“You’ve only known me for a few months.”

“Yeah, okay.” Lumine snorted, startling Xiao a little bit. “That’s true, but apparently I’ve talked to you more than anybody else in the world has in the last few months, except for maybe Zhongli.” She smiled, and there was a fresh lightheartedness in her eyes.

Archons. That was probably true.

“Let me be clear.” Lumine laid her palms up on the table, like she had nothing to hide. “I’m not here to push you into telling me anything. If you decide to never tell me anything about you, I won’t be able to look at you differently. But I hope you can take my word for this, after all this time that I’ve been with you already and all the things that you have seen me do.” She looked intently at him. “Are you listening?”

Xiao narrowed his eyes slightly, but he nodded. “Yes.”

She took a deep breath, looking him right in his golden eyes as sincerely as the sun shined. “Xiao, I am fully invested in whatever you want. If you want to never see me again, I’ll be sad, but I’ll do it. If you want to stay just like this, I’ll take it. But I’d sooner die than say that I didn’t *want* you to trust me and take this chance on me.” She leaned forward, reaching her hands further across the table. “I will not judge you or hate you. I can’t promise that I won’t have questions or thoughts about whatever you decide to say to me, but I want to know your truth *because I care about you and the things you have to say.*”

The last sentence tumbled out of her mouth in one breath, and she had to gulp for air a little bit after saying it.

He almost smiled. “Truly?”

“Pft.” Lumine shrugged her shoulders, waving one hand. “Unless you’re secretly the reason that I’m here and Aether is leading the Abyss, yes. I am one hundred percent certain that there is nothing you can do to make me think any less of you or leave you alone.” She absently picked up her chopsticks again, stabbing at the remains of the grilled tiger fish between them.

I want to give you the chance.

Xiao couldn’t control that line of thinking. She had stuck by him even after hearing what Ganyu had said. She had been there after his reunion with Zhongli, after an entire suicide attempt, and she’d never once breached his personal boundaries or asked about him. She had seen him destroy countless hilichurls with the Bane of All Evil. She had even been given a glimpse of his loss through her conversations with Pervases, and yet here she still was, sitting across from him and munching on the now-soggy skin of the tiger fish like it was nothing.

I want to believe you won’t go away.

“It doesn’t have to be now, by the way. You don’t have to make a decision now,” Lumine said around a mouthful of fish. “I’m sorry, I definitely made it sound like you absolutely needed to tell me right now. We can talk about something else. What’s your favorite color?” She swallowed. “Mine is green.”

“Green?” he echoed.

“Yeah. A soft green, like mint. Like Anemo. What’s yours?”

He’d never really thought about it before. “I don’t know. I really like most colors...” He frowned. “Except for black and red.”

“Interesting.” Lumine tilted her head. “Is there a reason for that?”

Xiao froze on the spot.

This is really happening.

Lumine definitely noticed that the atmosphere had shifted. She folded her hands demurely and looked down at them.

“This is hard,” he whispered. “I have only said it out loud once.”

If I don't say it, then I can pretend it didn't happen.

I can't to pretend anymore.

“Who did you say it to?” Lumine asked, equally quiet.

“我的妈妈。” He wrapped his hand around his left wrist. “The Hydro yaksha. But I didn't tell her everything. And I've never told anyone else.”

“I'm listening. And if you change your mind at any point, I'll never bring this up again. You're in control here.”

Xiao closed his eyes.

And he started talking.

◇ ◇ ◇

“My name was Alatus. I was born on April 17. I was normal. I was able to eat food and stomach it. I loved spicy food and trying new foods. I had a family that loved me. Our life was good... I remember hugs. And haircuts. Gliding and sparring, singing and dancing, protecting our home at Jueyan Karst, and living. That was all we did. That was all we ever needed to do.

“They always told me that I was born to be the way that I am. Everyone said it. Everyone in my family said it. They called me...

“... They called me beautiful.

“.

“They loved my voice. They told me I was born to be powerful.

“I can't stand it.

“The first time I ever fell asleep, I was kidnapped.

“.

“.

“This is really difficult.

“.

“.

“Everyone has a weakness. And this god took mine. And he took me. I couldn't scream for help. I couldn't do anything. I couldn't even cry.

“For two hundred years, I had no idea where I was. He chained me up in a dark room most of the time. He made me believe everything was my fault. Sometimes...

“Sometimes he’d burn me. Or force me to use the Bane of All Evil longer than I could handle it. He made me his slave. I had to kill—

“.

“I had to kill so many people. Humans, qilin, gods, children, families. He made me eat their dreams at first, and then. I started doing it by myself. I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t stop for a long time. I still want them, all the time, so bad that it hurts.

“The worst part is that sometimes he would be kind. Sometimes he would take care of me and protect me from people who...

“People who thought I was beautiful.

“Sometimes I think I owe him for my ability to survive this long. Sometimes I think it’s a sick elongation of his torture. I don’t know. I don’t understand.

“When Rex Lapis saved me, I had already given up. I thought he was going to kill me. I wanted him to kill me. But he saved me. He named me Xiao. He became my family, and he returned me to my family, and he made me an adeptus. I owe him everything. But he can’t save me from the karma tearing my soul apart for all of the horrible things I have done. It hurts, it stings and aches and separates me from my body, and he can’t save me. Nothing can.

“Karma is black and red. This god was black and red. The room I was chained in, the fire behind my eyelids, my burned skin and my blood, it’s all black and red.

“.

“Lumine.

“Lumine, I’m *ruined*.

“I fall apart all the time where no one can see me. I can’t go a day without being affected by what happened, even though it was so fucking long ago. I can’t forget. I can’t put it behind me. Who even am I without what he did to me?

“That’s just the beginning of the story. That’s just how everything started. *But I am the one who set this all in motion.* My existence, my sleep, my power, my face, my life made this happen. And people, people I love, are dead. And I am ruined.

“I don’t know what to do. I have to remind myself to breathe. I don’t sleep. I can’t eat. And every good thing will go away.”

Chapter End Notes

Take care of yourselves, my friends :)))

[Insights of Drifting Dreams](#)

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Invitation to Mundane Life, Part 2

Chapter Summary

“It’s okay, Xiao. There were so many warriors there that day, and I’m sure that a lot of them felt the same way that you did. I think sometimes we forget that the Archon War wasn’t really that long ago, and the adepti are still recovering from the effects.”

Xiao’s jaw clenched. “Please don’t act like you know what happened.”

“Oh...” Lumine withdrew, folding her hands together on top of the table, sincerity and full attention in every part of her posture. “I’m sorry. I’m here, and I’m listening. I promise.”

Chapter Notes

TW doozy; PTSD symptoms, self harm, mention of sa/assault, mention of gaslighting/manipulation, anxiety/panic attack

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Xiao’s heart pounded out of his chest. He couldn’t quite catch his breath. He had crushed his wrist in his hand so hard that he couldn’t move the fingers on his left hand. The need to shed tears had built painfully behind his eyes, but for the life of him he could not let them out. He had not looked up from the same wooden knot in the table all the while that he’d been speaking.

He was still, even now, fighting off dissociation as the ceiling compressed on him.

Breathe in.

Come on.

Breathe. In.

“Xiao?” Lumine called to him, quiet and a little shaky, but a welcoming anchor to his whirling, spiraling emotions.

His eyes slid tightly shut, but he nodded once to acknowledge her presence.

“What do you see?” She asked. “You’re at Wangshu Inn. The walls open up directly to the sky. The sun is shining. You’re safe. You’re okay.” The table creaked as she leaned forward. “You’re with me.”

She was still there.

She hadn’t run away from him screaming.

He had told her all of that, and she was still with him.

Inhale in. Exhale out. Again.

Slowly, slowly, his soul settled back into his body. Pressure was still built up around the bones in his face. He released his wrist, wincing as blood rushed back to his fingers, and pressed his temples.

He could sense Lumine watching him, but he couldn't bring himself to speak.

"Thank you," Lumine said gently. "Thank you for sharing with me. Thank you for trusting me."

Xiao cringed at the unfamiliar praise, but he finally managed to lift his head up and look at her. Some karmic pain stung at him, but after revealing the story of this magnitude, the pain was practically nothing. He rubbed at his left forearm impatiently.

"Thank you," she said again, smiling very slightly, and her familiar warmth was blessedly grounding to Xiao. "Are you fully present?"

"Just about," he answered, just above a whisper.

She nodded, then crossed her arms casually and dropped her head onto the table. "Can I just say that it's incredibly difficult for anyone to hear all of that and not want to give you a hug?"

Xiao winced. "Please don't."

"Don't worry, I know. I won't." Lumine picked up the cup of chrysanthemum tea still at her side and drank it down in one go. "God. I don't know what I expected. I'm sorry I ever dared to challenge your definition of *fucked-up shit*."

Xiao smiled wanly. "Is there anything you want to say?"

"Yeah, but only if you're ready to hear it."

He shook his head. "Please don't say you're sorry."

"I won't say I'm sorry."

"Don't say it's not my fault."

Lumine scowled, harsher than Xiao had ever seen her. "It's *not*. I need you to know that you did *not* get kidnapped because you were asleep, powerful, or hot. You got kidnapped because that motherfucker is a kidnapper."

Xiao huffed through his nose. "I know." He knew this logically in his head; it was just hard to internalize some facts in his heart. "Anything else?"

Don't go away.

She snorted. "Only that the second confession that I promised to tell you is really, really dumb compared to yours."

Xiao stared at her. "In the least self-centered way, I challenge you to find anyone in Liyue, dare I say in Teyvat, that has a more horrible story than mine."

"Fair." Lumine rested her head on her arms, looking up at Xiao through strands of her golden hair. "My confession is that I actually really liked the ginger Fatui guy."

“The..?” He thought back for a moment. Lumine had mentioned, right after the battle with Osial, that she had fought and defeated a Fatui Harbinger. Xiao had never seen him, but he’d heard enough horror stories and annoyed rabble from Zhongli and the other adepti. “The Harbinger from the battle with Osial?”

She sighed. “Yeah.”

“The one that summoned Osial and almost destroyed the city?”

She grumbled a little under her breath. “Yes.”

“Well.” Xiao blinked. If his spirit had not fully settled in his body before, it surely was settled now. “You’re right. That’s a really dumb confession. I have slightly less faith in your taste now.”

“Hey!” Lumine exclaimed, faux-indignant. “I have fantastic taste. I’m hanging out with you, aren’t I?”

Hah?

“And also this fish is very good!”

Xiao nodded in slightly bewildered agreement. “It is good.”

She shrugged, rolling her yellow eyes up. “Anyway, I admit that liking him is maybe not the best taste. I thought I would have a hard time trusting people after Childe betrayed me so hard, but honestly, Xiao, I trusted you right away.”

He knit his eyebrows. “You really shouldn’t.”

“Why not?” Lumine asked. “You protect me. You don’t lie to me. Maybe you keep very much to yourself, but you don’t lie to my face.”

Xiao cocked his head. He wasn’t sure that he wanted to know exactly everything about Lumine and the Harbinger’s relationship, but the hurt and resentment in her face was evident. “What did he do to you?”

“Nothing at all like what happened to you,” she answered. “It wasn’t really that bad. I just really thought that he liked me. As it turns out, all he liked about me was my ability to take him in a fight.” She frowned at the wall, avoiding looking at Xiao. “He made me like him, made me think of myself as more than just a Traveler to him, and then he crushed me emotionally. I think he *enjoyed* seeing how betrayed I looked. He used to call me by this title, I think it’s Inazuman for “little princess” or “little miss,” and then *right* before he tried to shoot me into the ground, he called me ‘Traveler.’ Just like everyone else does. He said, ‘I won’t kill you, Traveler, I just want to feel the thrill of battle. So why don’t you play with me?’”

Ew. Fucking humans.

“But, you know.” Lumine sat up straight again. “I beat him, and now we’re here. He’s trying to be all buddy-buddy with me now, but I need a little bit of space first.”

Xiao smiled faintly. “I’m impressed that you defeated the Harbinger and then helped defeat Osial on the same day.”

“The same *hour*, actually!” She grinned, just a little bit self-satisfied. “I had your help with Osial, so I can’t take credit for that.”

“... Oh.”

Lumine blinked in confusion. “What’s up?”

Xiao’s face twitched. “I didn’t help in the fight with Osial. I couldn’t even move.”

Maybe he felt guilty. Maybe he was self-sabotaging by testing the limits of what he could dare himself to confess. Maybe he wanted her to see how truly disgusting he was.

But Lumine hadn’t gone away. She blinked again. “I don’t understand. You saved me from falling.”

“Yes, but I didn’t help with the actual battle.”

“You gave me your speed—”

“Sure, but I did not pick up my spear a single time. I didn’t draw any blood that day, Fatui’s or Osial’s or anyone else.”

Archons. He couldn’t take it back now. His nails pressed sharp crescents into the flesh on the back of his arms.

“Fuck,” he hissed through clenched teeth, burning shame almost overwhelming all reason. “This is fucking humiliating.”

Lumine’s eyebrows turned up in concern. “It’s okay, Xiao. There were so many warriors there that day, and I’m sure that a lot of them felt the same way that you did. I think sometimes we forget that the Archon War wasn’t really that long ago, and the adepti are still recovering from the effects.”

Xiao’s jaw clenched. “Please don’t act like you know what happened.”

“Oh...” She withdrew, folding her hands together on top of the table, sincerity and full attention in every part of her posture. “I’m sorry. I’m here, and I’m listening. I promise.”

His awareness threatened to leave him at that moment, but Xiao dug a hard line into his arm. She was here. She was listening. *I will see this through.*

“I think...” he cleared his throat. “The god that kidnapped me made me confused about unwanted touch? Sometimes... Sometimes I wanted it because it was comforting, or familiar, and even though I hated him with everything that I was, I let it happen. Or I craved it.”

Blood started to pool in the divots under his nails. He forced his lungs open. *Inhale.*

“I always felt guilty about it. He broke every part of my spirit and almost destroyed my family, and I still...”

I let him touch me.

“You were touch starved,” Lumine offered, like a question or an option for Xiao to affirm or deny.

He nodded shallowly. “But I didn’t understand the difference in intent until he brought me to meet Osial. I was supposed to help him fight against Rex Lapis,” he murmured. “I wish he only saw me as a weapon. But he didn’t see me as a person at all.” *I’ve never told anyone this before.* “He...” *Fuck.* “He put his hands and his mouth on me. He pulled my hair, pulled me against him and made threats...”

Lumine's face shuddered slightly, like she was holding back a flinch, but she did not move from her seat. She leaned forward, eyes locked on Xiao's face.

He bit his lower lip. "He wasn't like how he was when you fought him. He had a physical human form and voice. He was less eroded then, more aware and able to talk, but I never forgot it. I've only seen him three times, and every time he makes me lose all of my function. And it sucks, because... *he didn't actually do anything*. I wasn't raped or even really touched. I shouldn't feel so violated or be so affected, but I never forgot."

His eyes flicked away to look at the knot in the table. If he didn't blink, the knot expanded and warped until it just about filled his vision entirely with a blur.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into the silence. "Sorry I didn't help fight him."

Lumine glanced up, and the motion made Xiao blink out of the darkness. "Don't apologize for having trauma," she said darkly. Her hands were trembling

A deep, irrational fear lodged between Xiao's eyes.

"Hell," she muttered. "Assault is assault. Just because someone else could have gone through something worse doesn't mean that what happened to you was nothing, okay? *Hell*." Her thumb started to pick aggressively at the nail beds of her fingers.

The fear expanded. Xiao's face was unbearably hot and freezing, clammy cold at the same time. He'd said too much. He'd told her too much, he'd fucked it up, *I fucked it up, she was my friend and I FUCKED IT UP—*

"I'm not mad at *you*, Xiao," she said, but the hard set of her eyes seemed to tell him otherwise. "I just have a lot of emotions right now." The muscles under her eyes twitched. Her fingers clicked audibly against the skin off her nails. She stood up all of a sudden, and Xiao's heart plummeted.

"What are you doing?" He asked, barely loud enough for himself to hear.

"I'm going to find whatever's left of Osial and that old god that took you," she answered coldly.

"*Why?!*" The question barely sounded like itself.

"To break their knees," she answered, matter-of-fact and icy cold at the same time, energy terribly dark and bitter.

He rolled his hands into fists, hard enough that his knuckles strained and seized, fingernails breaking more little cuts into his skin, his eyeballs were shaking in the sockets of his skull and the mangled mess of his lower lip tasted like blood and he hadn't even noticed he'd been destroying it in his teeth. His shoulders seized.

I hate this, I hate this, please stop please stay please go—

I shouldn't have told her.

I can't breathe.

"*Don't*." He managed to wrangle the word out of his mouth, although for all he knew over the sheer panic slowly permeating his mind, it could have left him as an unintelligible gurgle.

He hadn't felt this kind of gasping desperation in a long time. It was one thing to be praying for

someone who *wasn't with him and wasn't listening to hear him*. It was an entirely new kind of wretched helplessness to be begging someone to stay, begging someone *not* to defend him, against everything that he had prayed for in most of his life.

He couldn't articulate *why not* either. *Fuck*. It was all just too much all at once, irrational fear that Lumine couldn't beat them, that somehow they would take her away from them, or *worse* — that someone would convince her that he was lying! Or that it wasn't as bad as he had made it out to be! He was alive, wasn't he? He hadn't succumbed to karma yet, right? *Wasn't it all good and fine in the end?*

"Please don't react like this," he rasped, breath sticking. "Please. Don't see me differently like this. Don't. I'm sorry. *I'm sorry. Please don't go.*"

No one will believe me, no one else was there to see it,

and no one helped me and if I ask for help they're going to come back and say that

I'm overreacting and I shouldn't have said anything because

'they said they didn't do it and it's your word against theirs and no one was actually there to tell you it did or didn't happen or it was or wasn't as bad you say it was and it wasn't even that bad so who are you to say that it was and how dare you make things up I never want to see you again we are not friends we are nothing'

It's better for me to not say anything happened just let them be it's better because then they won't go don't go don't go DON'T GO—

"Xiao."

Lumine's voice was usually so grounding. Now, he flinched away.

"Xiao. Hey. I'm here. Can you look up and see me? I'm here."

He hadn't noticed his eyes were closed.

"Focus. Breathe. What do you see?"

He peered through the thin slits his eyelids released. He could see his right arm, fist bloodstained and still clenched on top of the table, his skin covered with red crescents that cut the contrast of his green tattoos. The table had splintered under the force of his hand. There was no hiding that. *Shit*. He closed his eyes again.

"I'm sorry," Lumine said quietly. The control and warmth had returned to her voice. His fingers loosened just a fraction. "I'm sorry I scared you. I didn't mean to. I just..." she breathed out slowly. "I'm sorry. You're okay. Can you breathe in deeply?"

He could try. *Inhale in*. One, two, three. *Exhale out*. And again, and again.

There was a clattering sound as Lumine collected the forgotten dishes and wood splinters into one pile. "We'll take care of that later. Xiao, can you follow me?"

Breathe in. Breathe out. He nodded shallowly.

He realized just then that at some point he had clutched onto the sash that flowed from Lumine's back. The material was crumpled into the tight fist of his left hand.

Blood rushed to his face, and somehow that diverted his attention enough for his jaw to relax a little bit as he forced his hand open to release the now-wrinkled fabric. *That's embarrassing.*

"Come on." She tugged gently on his sleeve, and he stood on stiff legs and followed her up the stairs to his balcony.

Thank Rex Lapis. He breathed in the fresh air deeply, sweet gingko and fresh air and old cuihua wood and almond tofu and a little bit of mint from that morning's tea. He inhaled all the way to the bottom of his lungs and blew out. He stepped lightly over to the railing and wrapped his hands around it, feeling the sturdiness of the wood, looking out at the golden Liyue landscape, taking in the sun and precious air.

Okay. *I'm okay.*

"I'm sorry," Lumine said again, as gently as possible as she moved to stand beside him and slightly behind. The dark energy she'd emitted before had dissipated. "I'm really sorry. I don't have an excuse. I know what I promised you, and I messed it up. I..." she sighed. "I know you think I'm good, but I'm not. I'm always down for a fight, and I jump to action a lot faster than I should, and I didn't listen to you. I'm sorry. If you want me to go away now, I'll go away."

He worked his jaw for a moment and swallowed the last of the panic in his throat before answering. "Stay." He cleared his throat and shook his head, as if that could give him a mental reset. "Stay," he said again, a little more clearly. "I'm sorry, I probably told you too much at once. That's enough."

"No, I'm sorry." Lumine stepped up to Xiao's side, putting her hands gingerly on the railing. "I told you I was ready to listen, and then I reacted badly. That's on me. I won't do it again. I'm in control, I promise. Don't think that you can't tell me anything anymore. I promise I don't and didn't see you differently, and you can tell me things. You can tell me things, and I will listen." She tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear, trying to look sincere, but the wind immediately blew it out again.

He almost smiled at that, but he didn't. "I'm still sorry for putting all of that on you at once."

"You're safe." She emphasized the word safe. "I'm not mad at you, and I'm not going anywhere. No one is upset that you didn't help fight, and no one is upset at you for the way things are now." She smiled slightly. "Don't apologize. It's not your fault. Please, don't apologize for having trauma."

He rubbed over the little red marks in his arms, willing them to heal faster. "It's not so bad. I've just... been through a lot."

Lumine frowned. "'A lot' seems to be a gross understatement. I wanna say you're like a walking ball of trauma. Respectfully, being enslaved and tortured for decades, and then losing your whole family and fighting an endless war, *alone*, seems to qualify as more than 'a lot.' Maybe more like 'constant suffering.'"

"Trauma or not, I have a contract, and it's my duty and honor to fulfill it. Even now that Osial is defeated, I feel like it's my responsibility to defend Liyue from the demons that still plague it." He moved from picking at his skin to rubbing his Vision with his fingers, pressing the glass against his knuckles. "I'm the last defender in this invisible war."

"Hm." Lumine sighed and rested her chin on her palm, looking up at Xiao with her honey-yellow eyes. "Then who will defend you?"

His eyes narrowed. “You said you wouldn’t see me differently.”

“Xiao, I mean it.” Her voice was calm. “I might just be another person with too much power and a lot of anger issues, not human or yaksha, but I’ve got enough empathy in me to notice that you think everyone expects you to just bounce back over time. You can say that ‘it happened a long time ago, I should be over it,’ but the fact is that *it happened to you* and it *sucked*. You’re a yaksha and you’re not delicate. That doesn’t mean that you can’t have trauma, and that doesn’t mean that you don’t deserve good things.”

He sighed. “People keep telling me things like this. I keep hearing that it’s not my fault, or that I deserve to be happy, or that it’s all going to be okay because people love me anyway or something like that. It doesn’t mean anything anymore.”

“Well.” Lumine tapped both hands on the railing. “Have you ever heard this before?”

“What?” He turned to look at her.

“You’re forgiven.”

Oh.

Time stopped. Xiao’s spirit dropped hard into his body.

“You’re forgiven for killing,” she continued softly. “You’re forgiven for all the instances that you hurt and punished yourself. You’re forgiven for causing your family all that pain after you disappeared. We forgive you. You’ve *been* forgiven. And even if you don’t think I have the right to say that, you have to know that this is true. And I’m still here.” Her yellow eyes were shiny, like they were brimming over, but her voice didn’t waver even a little bit. “I don’t see you differently, and I’m not going anywhere. You’re safe with me, and I know I haven’t given you a reason to believe that yet, but don’t give up on me. You’re safe with me.”

Oh.

My god.

Xiao’s lips parted slightly, but he didn’t gasp or sigh or make a single sound. It was as though instead of shattering, all the hard emotions caught between his mind and his heart liquefied into something numbly hot and bittersweet, swirling in the hollows of his nose and eyes.

I’m forgiven. I’ve messed up over and over and over but I’m forgiven.

He didn’t know how much time passed while he stood like that in a limbo between crying and also not crying, while Lumine stood there next to him, unmoving and unwavering, steady as ever and just present. Celestia knows if she had places to be, if she had other things scheduled for the day, whoever else needed her or whatever other responsibilities she had — she was still standing next to him.

“Xiao, breathe,” she reminded him gently.

He inhaled, and it was a little ragged, but he did it. “Thank you,” he said, barely above a whisper.

She smiled at him with just her warm yellow eyes, like she understood. “Xiao, you never answered my question.”

He squeezed his eyes shut tightly before opening them again. “What was your question?”

“Who will defend you?” She leaned very far forward over the railing, shooting up his nervous blood pressure the way she usually did, and grinned brightly, a peek of her radiant energy returning. “Who takes care of you?”

Xiao turned away. “I take care of myself.”

Lumine half-laughed. “Alright. I know you’re the Almighty Vigilant Yaksha, Conqueror of Demons, General of Rex Lapis’s Army, but that’s so unsustainable, Xiao. Even *Zhongli* needs support.”

He eyed her in his peripherals. “From who?”

She tilted her head from side to side. “Hu Tao, sometimes. Me, sometimes. I’m sure he’s got Archon friends, too. Venti, maybe.”

“Mm.” Xiao folded his arms, leaning his weight on the railing. “Zhongli isn’t me.”

Lumine laughed again, louder this time, spreading her arms out wide as she looked intently at him. “The strongest of us need help sometimes, Xiao! And clearly, since *you’re* the strongest, you need support sometimes.”

His eyes narrowed. “You think I’m the strongest?”

She blinked. “Uhm. Yeah?” She bounced lightly on the soles of her feet. “I know I don’t deserve it after today, but if you’re okay with it, I want to support you. You can tell me things, and I will listen. I’m still learning, but I’ll listen.”

Since Xiao was a newborn yaksha, he’d wondered about power. He had never *felt* strong; in fact, most of the time, he felt helpless as hell. Maybe he had power, elemental power and martial prowess, but none of that was truly *strength* in the moments where it counted.

The god that had enslaved him had thought that control was strength, but controlling the powers that be did not help him at all. In the moments that it counted, without Xiao, he was nothing.

Rex Lapis had it right, Xiao knew. He could vaguely remember the dream of a goddess long in the past, where she had said that “the people loved Rex Lapis more than they feared him.” With love that deep, any Liyuen, human or adeptus, would have dropped anything for Rex Lapis in a heartbeat, even though he had had the physical greatness to match his reputation.

Then there was Lumine, overflowing with more elemental power than anyone in Teyvat could even dream of with no end in sight. She was more recognizable in the world than either of the Archons that Xiao had ever met. From what he knew, she was beloved by practically everyone in both Mondstadt *and* Liyue, with all the Mondstadtian Knights and Millelith and Qixing at her service.

But she’d said it herself. She had trouble controlling her temper, and Xiao couldn’t be certain that said temper would never turn on him. She’d literally single-handedly triggered an entire panic attack in him just a minute ago.

Even before he could address that, he had another pressing thought:

“Aren’t you going away?” He asked finally. “You’re looking for your brother. You’re literally a full-time traveler. Once you leave Liyue, you can’t keep your word that you’re going to support me, or whatever it is you think you can do for me.”

It was so classic, so obvious, that Xiao cursed himself quietly for not thinking of it sooner.

Everyone died, disappeared, forgot, or otherwise left him. The Traveler had stayed today, but why should he believe that she would continue to stay in the future?

To his surprise, she grinned. Radiant. “I wanna make a proposition.”

He blinked. “What?”

Lumine took a step back and spread her hands out in front of her, and Xiao had to turn to look at her straight on. “I like you a lot, Xiao. I like talking to you. I like fighting alongside you. I like learning from you, hearing everything you have to say, and even just spending time in the same space as you. I like you for you — not *despite* everything that you’ve gone through, but you as well as everything that you’ve gone through. I like you as you are.”

Xiao cringed from the attention and raised one hand to cover the color that was surely rushing to his face. “What’s your point?”

She clapped her hands together with another smile. “I want to formally invite you to mundane life.”

Hah? “What do you mean?”

“I mean, come adventuring with me!” Lumine laughed out loud, so full of genuine cheer and excitement that Xiao couldn’t help but smile bemusedly at her. “Travel with me. Go where I go. We’ll make almond tofu, we’ll glide everywhere, we’ll fight mobs, see things no average citizen has ever seen before. Flowers, food, landmarks, everything. You and I, and maybe sometimes Paimon.” She winked. “I’ll tell you a secret. A lot of traveling is a lot of waiting for new things to come along, or waiting for the next step by exploring and finding treasure. Maybe it’s not mundane to the average human, but I’m telling you, after the life that you’ve had, you deserve some relatively chill traveling.”

Xiao just about short-circuited, still half-smiling with one side of his face like an idiot. He had never been quick to process things like this. “Hah?”

“Zhongli told me I have to go to Inahsma next, and I want you to go with me.”

“eE-NA-ZOO-ma,” Xiao corrected automatically without thinking about it. “Not ee-NAZ-ma.”

“I-na-zu-ma,” she enunciated carefully. “See, I already need you.”

“Okay, but...” Xiao’s mind started racing, and he didn’t know where the finish line was. “Liyue still needs protecting. There’s still demons, and the invisible war. The Lantern Festival is coming up in just a few weeks, and that’s when they come out the most.”

Lumine tilted her head in understanding, but quirked her mouth to one side. “Okay, you’re right, but do you realize that the point of Zhongli’s existence is to prove that the age of adepti is over, yes?”

“Uhm.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’ve said it yourself, that the humans don’t *need* you anymore,” she reminded him. She started counting on her fingers. “Between the Millelith, the Adventurers, the adepti, and the intense forces of Ganyu, Zhongli, Keqing, Ningguang, Hu Tao, Xinyan, Xiangling—” she stopped to take a breath— “Qiqi, Yanfei, Baizhu, Xingqiu, Chongyun, and probably a hundred other Vision users that I can’t remember right now or haven’t met yet, you have to believe that they have got the mobs covered, and you can trust them. If anything, lest you forget, we can teleport. We can come back anytime.”

This was true.

A small flicker that Xiao almost didn't even recognize as hope began to grow in his heart.

The echo of the purpose that he had nearly forgotten that he wanted, a spoken prediction and a silent wish over a cup of tea leaves, just under the tree that he could look at right this moment; this echo now came forward full-force into his memory, along with the thought from all those years ago:

I want this future more than I've ever wanted anything before.

He blinked his gold eyes absently, barely seeing at all. Was this prediction from centuries ago coming true? *Was her invitation the opportunity that Zhongli told him to consider?*

Damn. He needed some time to process this. He rubbed the clouds from his eyes and looked at Lumine.

"Frick," she was muttering. "I forgot Yun Jin and Beidou." She looked up to see him staring at her, and she shrugged. "There's a lot of people in Teyvat, Xiao. I can't remember everyone off the top of my head."

"Mhm," he hummed.

Lumine's face twisted in concern. "Sorry, that was a lot of emotion for just one day," she said. "You don't have to answer me right now or anything, but this offer doesn't expire, okay? You can join me anytime, and don't ever feel obligated to stay with me. Do what feels right for you."

Xiao nodded, huffing softly through his nose. "I'm okay. Don't apologize. Thank you for the offer."

The sun was starting to set on what felt like the longest afternoon of his entire life. At this point, he and Lumine had watched the sun go down or come up about a million times, but it never made Lumine any less excited to see it happen. To be fair, it was hard not to appreciate the sunset when it happened directly in front of them.

"Ooo," Lumine murmured appreciatively as the gold sky melted into a rich fuchsia.

She had told him about herself. He'd told her the worst of his life stories. She'd shown him just the surface of her internal fury. He'd almost fallen apart as a result.

Even so, the day was ending, and she was still there.

The evening air was cool and fresh on Xiao's face, and nearly out of nowhere, he felt emboldened. "I'm going to go sit on the roof," he announced. "Come with me?"

Lumine's surprised smile just about outshone the setting sun. "Yeah, of course!"

They walked together up and over the edges of the roof, their footsteps thumping lightly on the green tiles but otherwise quiet and comfortable. Xiao moved to sit on the sun-baked terracotta.

Less gracefully, and with absolutely no fear of dirtying her white dress, Lumine threw herself down onto the tiles in a heap and stretched out with her hands behind her head, staring up at the darkening sky through the ginkgo leaves.

Xiao smiled. His soul felt lighter.

“Hey,” Lumine said aloud into the quiet.

“Hm?”

She kept her shining eyes on the sky. “Do you know what happens when you lay down like this anywhere outside?”

He nodded, thinking of Rex Lapis and Ganyu. “I’ve heard this one before. Is it that you hear the heartbeat of the world?”

“What?” Lumine turned to look at him, clearly puzzled. “No.” She reached out and tugged gently at his sleeve, pinching the silk between her fingers.

The small motion had bothered him months ago, but at this point he allowed her to guide him until his back rested against the warm tiles.

She looked back up, pointing out at the stars that started to peek out from between the leaves. “You get to see the entire world look back at you.”

And he did.

It was beautiful.

Through the patches of leaves, the now-dark blue night sky was bright with starlight.

The last time he’d done this, he’d been with Indarias, his head on her shoulder, sharing memories of their family, hearing her speak of just how much love she had to give before he finally told her everything that had happened to him, less than he’d said today but just as painful.

She’d forgiven him. She hadn’t said it outright, but she had.

Even after all these centuries, he could remember their conversation.

(“Was today a good day?”)

(“No. Today was a terrible day. Things are different. Things are going to continue to be different. But we are still here. And it is still a good life. We will adjust to this new life together.”)

*(“When your heart feels heavy
Let this song carry you away.
When the darkness comes
Just know that I’ll be here
Always watching you
I will be right here.”)*

Even if no one else was there to see, the events of his life had happened; his truth mattered. He was heard. And he was forgiven.

The stars blurred in front of Xiao’s eyes. “I see it,” he whispered through the melody of his memories. “I see the world looking back at me.”

Lumine shifted slightly beside him. “Xiao,” she said, equally quiet. “I’m still sorry about today. Thank you for telling me your story. I promise, I will listen to you, and I won’t act without your consent. I’m really sorry. I’m going to try to do better and never trigger you again. My big emotions are not your fault.” She paused and swallowed, like she was working up her nerve. “I’m

so sorry. Will you forgive me?"

His eyes stung slightly, and he let his eyelids fall shut. "Yes," he answered. "Thank you." *Inhale. Exhale.* "Thank you for listening to all of it. I'm sorry for bothering you."

"Hey." Now Lumine spoke aloud. "I'm not bothered. I could listen to you forever."

Xiao huffed. It was almost a laugh. "You don't have to do that."

Lumine coughed. "Let me rephrase that. I *want* to listen to you forever."

Oh.

Okay.

Xiao continued to look up at the sky. There was too much to process before even thinking about the implications of that statement, too much noise and battered emotional verbiage or whatever in his mind, and no thought was explicitly clear enough for him to focus on one branch or another — except for one, that almost surprised Xiao so much that he nearly bolted upright.

I really like her. I really, really like her.

I want her to stay with me.

I want to stay with her.

*I
Want
Her
To
Touch
Me.*

Chapter End Notes

In case you're wondering, the only known/released Liyuen Vision users Lumine didn't list because she hasn't met them yet are Shenhe and Yelan.

Yes I spend most of my time researching canon for this story :DDD also YAY THE BIT THAT I WROTE FOR THE ENTIRE WORK SUMMARY HAS FINALLY COME INTO THE ACTUAL STORY! I WROTE IT LIKE LAST YEAR AND I FINALLY GOT TO USE IT!

I love you guys, thank you so much and please comment and encourage me because wow I am not a fluff writer

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At Arm's Length

Chapter Summary

So it went, answering prayers and seeking out all sources of negative miasma, no matter how trivial or where. The Lantern Rite was coming up. It would be the first Lantern Rite since Osial was defeated, and Xiao wasn't totally certain what to expect. There would definitely be less demons than ever before, but any malignancy had to be investigated. Even if it brought him to Liyue Harbor.

Usually, if there was some disturbance in the city, Xiao would leave it to the Millelith, but things were different right now; so when he sensed an extremely mischievous, self-satisfied, and ill-intentioned soul at the bay, he had to look into it — although teleporting directly into the harbor might have been a mistake.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Absolutely not.

Those two words ran a noisy loop in Xiao's mind, his own voice firmly overwhelming any other sound, even the unintelligible babble of the ghosts that screamed at him when he put his mask on and cut down the few demonic mobs in the area.

Absolutely not.

Absolutely.

Not.

He was just emotionally vulnerable. That was all. He'd dredged up some of the nastiest parts of his past and that had left him raw and susceptible to invasive thoughts; of course he'd be feeling all kinds of ways in the aftermath. He was feeling rather dark and bleak, but that was obviously a result of the extreme emotional catharsis. When Zhongli asked about her later that week, he answered "I told her some things" before carrying the topic. Whatever Zhongli suspected, he didn't press Xiao for answers.

Under the firm denial, Xiao's heartbeat steadily thrummed a consistent *ba-bum* of *too close, too close, too close, too close*.

He found reasons to avoid Lumine for the next few days, going out of his way to answer even the most pointless prayers or take down unpossessed mobs around the slope. He kept one ear open for Lumine, just in case, *just in case* she needed his help and called his name, but the other ear roared in a hope that she wouldn't call him.

Or maybe it hoped she would, and he just refused to interpret it that way.

Almighty yaksha, save me from these hilichurls!

Done.

O Adepti, heal my daughter!

He cleared out some nearby possessed abyss mages and Cryo whopperflowers, dispersing their miasma and negative karma. Prayer answered.

Dear adeptus, please make me rich!

Xiao made it a mission to stay far away from this one.

And so it went, answering prayers and seeking out all sources of negative miasma, no matter how trivial or where. The Lantern Rite was coming up. It would be the first Lantern Rite since Osial was defeated, and Xiao wasn't totally certain what to expect. There would definitely be less demons than ever before, but any malignancy had to be investigated. Even if it brought him to Liyue Harbor.

Usually, if there was some disturbance in the city, Xiao would leave it to the Millelith, but things were different right now; so when he sensed an extremely mischievous, self-satisfied, and ill-intentioned soul at the bay, he had to look into it — although teleporting directly into the harbor might have been a mistake.

Salty air, people-sweat and human dreams, fish bits, and smoke immediately crushed his skull, and the boards rocked under Xiao's feet. *Damn.*

In the distance, the mischievous soul sprinted away, huffing and puffing while also making a lot of noise from footsteps. Xiao squinted after it; it was clearly human, not very smart, and not worth chasing. That was just as well. He didn't deal with humans.

Something clattered to the ground behind the human. The human looked back briefly, but clearly whatever had scared him into running away was much more threatening than the loss of this object.

Xiao bent over to pick the item up, turning it around in his fingers. It was a slightly tarnished bronze coin, larger than a Mora and imprinted with what could have been a bird or a wave. There were some numbers on it, potentially some kind of code, but they meant nothing to Xiao.

"Ahhhhhha! I knew it!" The unmistakable squeal of Paimon's voice rang out like a shot from behind a pile of crates. Xiao froze.

"Should we chase after him? We should chase after him."

Lumine's face and Paimon's head and shoulders all appeared around the corner of a stack of crates before Xiao could get his bearings back.

"Eep!" Lumine jumped in surprise, bonking her head against Paimon. *"Hi! Hi, Xiao."*

Archons. Was she happy to see him? Was she mad that he hadn't been around? Xiao's eyes felt very dry. He'd successfully not seen her for almost a week, and now she was here, chasing the same presence that he'd been after. *What am I supposed to do? What should I say?*

Absolutely not, the loop insisted.

"Lumine. Paimon," he said, voice much colder and more uncaring than intended. *Awkward.*
"You're just everywhere all the time, aren't you."

Lumine blinked. *"What do you mean? So are you! Do you ever rest?"*

He frowned. Had she already forgotten everything that he had told her? “I don’t sleep. Have some respect for the ways of the adepti.”

“There are other ways to rest. Sleep isn’t the only way to get rest,” Lumine pointed out.

Paimon floated up, over Lumine’s head. “What are you doing here anyway, Xiao? Are you here for the festival?”

“Absolutely not,” he answered sharply, cursing inwardly as he realized he was just echoing the loop in his mind. He shook his head. “I’m not interested in the Lantern Rite. I sensed a malign presence here, and I thought it might be demonic. The miasma is drawn to the positive energy of the festivals.” He looked off in the direction of the man with the self-satisfied aura. “But since you’re here, I suppose it’s your responsibility.” Xiao lightly tossed the coin to Lumine without looking at her.

She caught it easily and examined it, shifting slightly so that Paimon could have a look, too. “It’s a treasure hoarder insignia, but it’s a little bit different from any that I’ve collected before. Paimon, does it look off to you? Do you recognize it?”

“Nope.” The fairy looked up at Xiao. “Why can’t you do it?”

Lumine nudged her. “He doesn’t handle human affairs, Paimon.”

Xiao huffed. “Because if I become involved, there will be much more bloodshed than usual at this Lantern Rite.”

“Oooh,” Paimon said ominously.

But Lumine just laughed. “Actually, that’s very appropriate.” She winked and pocketed the insignia. “Red is a very festive color in Liyue, isn’t it?”

“*Lumi!*” Paimon yelled, horrified. “*That’s terrible!*”

Xiao didn’t even know how to respond to that. He shook his head in disbelief and stared at Lumine.

She held his gaze right back.

He blinked.

She was already smiling, but somehow her eyes smiled back, small and sparkling with fun.

For a moment, hard gold and pale yellow connected, and Xiao did not look away.

“Right.” She turned on her heel. “See you later, Xiao.”

“Bye!” Paimon echoed before following.

Was he disappointed to watch them go? Lumine hadn’t shown any sign of being upset that he’d avoided her — but maybe she just hadn’t noticed because of how irrelevant his presence was to her life. Maybe something else had happened.

Too close, his heart said.

Still, he kept one ear open as he teleported out of the harbor.



Grass was loud, rustling crisp all around him, every dust mote floating on the air sharp and clear, and wind rushed through his hair and ears. Lonely. All at once, the world was vast, tremendously and insurmountably large, and Xiao was so very small.

He didn't really know what to do now. Maybe that was the last he'd ever see of Lumine. *That's fine. That's perfect.*

It's fine.

One unexpected side effect of his emotional downpour with Lumine was that all of his memories of his family had surged forward, another downpour unto itself that more or less resulted in some slight reflection on Pervases and a mouthful of tiger fish that had been delicious for half a second and left him with a hungry, grasping longing for his family.

He had teleported to the outskirts of Jueyan Karst. These days, the karst was mostly occupied only by Moon Carver and humans that went back and forth to the domains, or maybe Qiqi collecting herbs, but most of the time it was empty. It was early in the morning, clouds low against the land and cool February wind like silk over Xiao's shoulders. It smelled like it might rain. The lack of sun through the clouds covered the karst in a thin, misty gray veil, undersaturated and more dead than it really was, wildly different from the way he remembered it.

Or maybe that was just the way that he thought he remembered it. He missed the sun.

He dropped down from the higher rocks, closer to the side of the waterfall where he spent his first hundred years with his family, the place he still remembered but no longer knew. The waterfall was louder than it used to be, not much different from the lonely wind, but Xiao sat on the damp grass beside it anyway. He tucked his knees under his chin, wrapped his arms around his legs like a child, and closed his eyes. The crashing waterfall could drown out the sounds of his thoughts, the ever-noisy spinning that hadn't really gone away:

I am the worst, I am the worst.

Here he was, in the center of his home, and the memories of his family were slipping away from him. He tried to recall Menogias's voice in his head, and he couldn't. He really couldn't. When was the last time he had actively tried to remember his family like this?

"Indarias," he murmured. "Bosacius, Menogias, Bonanus, Antheas, Somnius, Pervases."

The names fumbled on his tongue.

Stress bubbled up in Xiao's chest, overflowing and creeping up into his throat, and his hands trembled. *My family.*

He had called out Paimon a long time ago for being sad and feeling pity for the yakshas, but he had pushed down the memory of them for so long that he couldn't remember them strongly anymore. Wasn't forcibly forgetting so much worse than crying? Why was it that the good memories eroded while the bad memories refused to go? Karma stung intensely at his skin, burning and pricking, and he tried uselessly to curl around the sensation in the cave of his chest.

Water trickled into his eyes, and he blinked in surprise. In the last few minutes he'd spent in his head, it had started raining, pattering tiny splinters of glass against the rock and onto Xiao's scalp. He looked up, letting the drops fall into his eyes, flowing down the sides of his face, into his mouth. Some manic part of him thought, *that's great for the Lantern Festival, to get the rain out of*

the way in the morning.

As if he cared about the Lantern Festival, where he'd have to fight demons alone, again, without his family to shield, support, or heal him. Just him, just Xiao, alone in the vast expanse of Liyue under the sky of another impossible year.

Jueyan Karst blurred into gray waves.

Xiao sighed. He had to get out of here. He closed his eyes against the blur and teleported without thinking too much about it.

Crack.

He sighed again into the rain. When he opened his stupid eyes, he was at stupid Bosacius's stupid monument. It was lit up, glowing blue and spinning, whipping rain off of its smooth surface. Someone had activated it and taken his treasures.

Serves you right, Xiao thought bitterly before immediately regretting it. He crushed his hand into a fist. *Oh, I am the worst. I can't even remember my brother properly and now I'm bitter towards him.*

"Sorry," he mumbled aloud to the monument.

It thankfully did not answer.

"I hope you're still out there somewhere, Bo," he muttered. "You better be helping some other people fight. And it better be more important than helping *me* fight." He thrust his fist halfheartedly at the wet stone, which naturally bounced right back off. "I would have gone with you."

No one stayed. He would believe that someone would stay, that he could have his family, that he could have friends, and then break again, dealing with himself and protecting himself. And now that someone really wanted to be with him, and *maybe could actually, really be with him*, he was avoiding her. He didn't think that he could stand to be let down again. Or maybe he was so used to it that it wouldn't even come as a surprise.

Somehow that seemed even more sad and pathetic.

How am I feeling broken that everyone goes away when I haven't seen Lumine in days, right after she literally asked me to be by her side for the rest of her journey?

HOW DOES THAT MAKE ANY SENSE?

He scowled in frustration and shook his head, thumping his fist against the glowing stone again. Water splattered off of the sculpture. "I don't know what to do. I hate fighting alone." His words were lost to the rain. "I miss you guys. I don't want to be alone anymore."

I don't want to be alone anymore.

Oh.

It wasn't as though he didn't have anyone. He had Zhongli. Sometimes. Zhongli, who had a job in the city, who had moved forward, and who also was pretty consistently telling him to also find ways to move forward.

But he also had Lumine. Lumine, sunny, yellow-eyed, warm Lumine, near-invincible dual wielder Lumine, secret-sharing, anger-issues-Lumine, amnesiac-with-her-own-problems Lumine, Lumine who wanted him to make his own decisions, Lumine who surprised and pushed him relentlessly without ever forcing him to do anything. Lumine who wanted to be with him. Who wanted him to travel with her. *With her.*

Huh.

He stared blankly into the gray sky. Raindrops beaded on his eyelashes. His hair was soaked through, plastered to his neck and forehead. Water was starting to fill his boots. He didn't really feel it.

Absolutely not, the loop persisted, but a louder thought crashed over it and wiped it out.

Why not?

Huh.

Because moving forward might mean leaving his family behind? Wouldn't leaving Liyue mean neglecting the legacy that they had fought so hard to create, even without the adept contract? Lest he forget, the Lantern Rite was still tonight, and he'd still be without them. Without anyone.

Still, he stood there soaking wet with the cold realization sending chills up and down his spine: *I don't want to be alone anymore.*

I don't want to be alone anymore.

I don't want to—

“XIAO!”

His head snapped up in the direction of the prayer. Lumine. *Ohgodohfuckoharchons.*

An instinctive recoil of panicky anxious fear crossed over him like a shroud, but he shook it off in less than a heartbeat. She had called for him. She needed help. Now was not the time to consider his own useless awkwardness.

One, two, three.

Breathe in, breathe out.

He was at her side in a flash of darkness and a *crack*, surrounded by a mass of treasure hoarders quickly closing in around them. He blinked against the sudden southern sun, but a quick glance around at the mountains and waterfalls told him that they were in Lisha, near the abandoned village by the yakshas' shrine. Lumine looked furious and tired, her hair standing out in blond wisps from her head and her sword drawn. Paimon was bobbing anxiously near her shoulder. Thankfully, they both looked okay, or at least not hurt.

“What's going on?” He asked quietly, blinking the rainwater from his eyes and pushing his hair back, taking in the leering treasure hoarders around them.

“The sneak we almost caught at the harbor sent a letter to these guys, and now I could use some backup,” Lumine answered quickly under her breath. “They all appeared at once, and I wasn't prepared for a fight like this. Please help.”

Xiao's fingers itched for his spear. What had they done? How had she even gotten herself into the situation, so bad that she needed his protection?

The treasure hoarder directly in front of them snapped his fingers at them, like they were dogs. "Hey, stop messing around! *Who are you?* And how do you know about the letter to the treasure hoarders?"

"This adeptus told us!" Paimon blurted out before glancing apologetically at Xiao. She did a double take just then and looked back at him, raising one tiny eyebrow. "Um, why are you all wet?" she whispered.

He held up a finger in a quiet *not now*.

What is she talking about?

"Did he?" Another treasure hoarder stepped a little closer, looking Lumine up and down in a way that made Xiao's skin crawl. "Oh, somehow I doubt that. Don't you doubt that, Bei'er?"

The first man, Bei'er, nodded. "I *seriously* doubt that." His eyes raked over Xiao and Lumine, gaze coming to rest on Lumine's legs, and she flinched.

A surge of anger rushed through Xiao all at once. *Fuck* humans. "You shouldn't doubt me," he said, almost surprising himself at the level of casual power that carried on his voice. "I sent them here to investigate. You may direct any further questions to me."

Uneasy murmurs rumbled through the mass of treasure hoarders. A few of them took steps back, Xiao smiled with grim satisfaction, and Lumine exhaled slowly at Xiao's side.

Bei'er, who must have been the leader, raised one skeptical eyebrow. "You... *You're* the Vigilant Yaksha?" he asked, more amused than anything else.

"*Hey!*" Paimon shouted indignantly. If she'd been able to, Xiao was sure the fairy would have stamped her tiny foot. He almost smiled at her. "Watch your tone! Or do you seriously wanna pick a fight with an adeptus?!"

"I meaaaaaaan..." Bei'er shrugged dismissively, faking a yawn. "it's not like we *don't* believe that a wet cat-looking boy is an adeptus? There's just a bigger picture here, y'know?"

"Yeah, we're no threat!" The other treasure hoarder piped up, screeching voice grating Xiao's nerves. "We're just..." he winked at Lumine, who shuddered. "Just petty criminals, that's all! No big deal."

"Of course, if it turns out you're *not* a real adeptus..." Bei'er brandished his staff. "Then you won't blame our weapons for treating everyone equally."

The treasure hoarders all around them pulled out all kinds of low level weapons: hammers, oars, small knives, shovels, little vials of potions, and crossbows, which were wildly inefficient for close combat. Xiao smirked slightly when he heard one treasure hoarder cursing as he braced his foot against his crossbow, trying to load in a single arrow.

Lumine shook her head slightly. "I promise you, I would have been able to take all of them if I'd just slept more this week," she muttered. "Are you going to have trouble with hurting humans in this scenario?"

"No." Xiao summoned his glowing jade spear. "Not at all."

He immediately dashed forward to the “*oh, shit!*” of some of the masses, swinging with the butt end of his spear instead of stabbing. He would not draw blood, but he’d be damned if he let these stupid humans that dared to threaten Lumine walk away without consequence. He ducked under knives and arrows, crushing dropped crossbows under his boots, knocking weapons out of the hands of the men and hopefully just slightly breaking some bones.

“Xiao, left!” Lumine yelled, and he whipped around towards her. She had summoned a rolling gust of wind that pulled in some screaming treasure hoarders, their pathetic arms and legs waving uselessly, smelling overwhelmingly of human sweat, cheap cologne, and greed.

Xiao struck his spear handle against the treasure hoarders and sent them in every direction, shouting, running away, or disappearing in clouds of smoke. A vial of Electro potion soared through the air, but Lumine slammed down a Geo meteorite, blocking the smashed glass and creating a Geo shield for the two of them.

It was nice fighting alongside her. Their combat styles were oddly compatible. He knew exactly what he was doing to protect her, and it took no effort at all on his part. He didn’t use any elemental energy. He didn’t need his mask. There was just Lumine grinning as she drew the men in with her Anemo and the bright jade of Xiao’s spear sweeping a graceful arc through the rolling gust, all in nearly perfect synchronization under the glowing amber shield. Neither of them wasted a single movement.

It was *fun*.

He was almost a little disappointed when Bei’er screamed and threw his hands up to protect himself, all of his treasure hoarder lackeys reduced to either cowards that ran away or humbled men groaning on the dirt. “*We’re sorry!*” He squealed, literally squealed. “O Great One! Heroic Yaksha of Liyue! Divine Adeptus and Friend of the People! Have mercy! *Have mercy!*”

Xiao wrinkled his nose as he lowered his spear, but Lumine laughed out loud. “*That’s* pathetic. Stop brown-nosing, you poorly packaged potato.”

Paimon and Xiao both hid a smile at that.

Bei’er frantically reached into the pocket of his jacket, withdrawing a piece of folded paper. “This letter is nothing anyway! It’s not worth it, please, just take it!”

“Ha!” Paimon flew down and snatched the paper from him, passing it to Lumine while sticking her tongue out at the wretched man. “We knew you had it all along!”

Xiao vanished his spear. “What does it say?”

The paper rustled in Lumine’s hand as she scanned it. “It’s really badly written by our sneaky guy from the docks earlier, but it seems like he’s not even a treasure hoarder. He’s just a fan trying to prove himself through arson, I guess.”

“*ARSON?*” Bei’er’s eyes popped out of his head.

Lumine looked down at him, yellow eyes flashing dark. “Are you still here?” she asked, voice dripping with contempt. “Go on, pervert. Run along.”

Xiao gave the treasure hoarder a sharp glare, and he yelped and scrambled to his feet, running away into Lisha with the remaining treasure hoarders at his heels. Good riddance. “Lumine, are you okay?”

“Hm?” She looked up from the letter. “Oh. Yeah.” She shook her head, smoothing down her flyaway hair. “When we saw you in the harbor, we’d just chased the writer of this letter away from a bunch of crates of oil, paper, and wood that were meant for lantern-making. He really seemed like he was up to no good, huh.” She smiled at him, her sunny expression returning to her face. “Thanks for coming through, Xiao.”

Why haven't you been sleeping? Are you upset I did not offer to help you with this quest? Did you only need me to help you fight?

He did not ask. “Is he planning to burn down the city?” Human affair or not, that was something worth getting involved in.

“That’s what it looks like, but don’t worry. We can handle it, right, Paimon?”

Lumine held her palm up to Paimon, who happily returned the high five. “Right!”

She didn’t need him anymore. That was just as well. “Okay.” He turned to go. *This is fine.*

“Wait—” Lumine reached out, and her fingers came so close to his shoulder that he could feel the warmth of them, but they never made contact. “Xiao, wait.”

“What?” He turned back. His skin tingled where she’d almost touched him.

She hesitated for a second, lowering her head so that he couldn’t see her eyes. “The next time I see you...”

Oh shit.

Anxiety danced up Xiao’s windpipe in a wild zigzag he couldn’t swallow. There were a million different ways she could end that sentence, and none of them were good. *The next time I see you, it will be the last time. I have to go away forever. I’m dying. I hate you.* “What is it?”

She lifted her eyes, and the yellow warmth was so intense he swore that the rainwater still in his scalp immediately dried then and there. “The next time I see you, can it be somewhere that we can see the mingxiao lantern? Together?”

.

Well. That was not one of the sentences he’d predicted.

“OooooOoOooOooooOOOooooOooOOooOOOooooOoooo!” Paimon cooed.

What does this mean?

The giant mingxiao lantern of the Lantern Rite was released in Liyue Harbor, where there were people and sensations and prayers and just. Too much. *Too close.*

Xiao looked away from those yellow eyes. “I don’t like crowds, but you can just come to the inn or something. I’m pretty sure the lantern is visible from there.” He raked his fingers through his hair, combing out the last of the rainwater, noticing just then that the sun was now shining brightly over Lisha and Liyue Harbor. “Just let me know when everything with this arsonist is resolved.”

“Okay.” Lumine smiled again, but this time there was something like an excited secret in the set of her lips. “We’ll meet you at the inn.”

Xiao furrowed his eyebrows. “What are you planning?”

“Oh, nothing!” Lumine reached out for Paimon. “See you later!”

“Bye, Xiao!” Paimon waved as the two of them skipped off towards Lingju Pass.

He cocked his head, gazing off unseeing at the waterfall. Why had he agreed to that? Why did he bother to follow up? *Why did he invite her to the inn after avoiding her for days?* None of his decisions made any sense when Lumine was around. He felt stupid and confused.

Still, after this long morning, he couldn’t help thinking that maybe she would agree to help him with the Lantern Rite demons.

◇ ◇ ◇

Lumine and Paimon just showed up at the Wangshu Inn balcony later in the afternoon, unruffled and unhurt in any way from how he’d last seen them. Good.

“Is everything resolved?” He asked as they approached him. He’d been so uninvolved with this quest in his attempts to distance himself from Lumine, and yet here she was. Because he’d invited her. For some reason.

Today was just not a good day for Xiao’s train of thought.

“Yup,” Lumine grinned, planting both hands triumphantly on the balcony railing. “Turns out the guy isn’t an arsonist, and he doesn’t care about the Lantern Rite. He was just going to steal this giant floating rock from the lantern-making supply stash and hide it in the bay.”

Xiao frowned. “How was that going to work?”

“Yeah, that’s what Paimon said!” Lumine sighed, and Paimon echoed the sentiment. “We handed him over to the Millelith.”

“Good. Thanks for the update.” He extended his senses out towards the harbor, where he could feel the excitement and stress of the bustling city. “It seems like the Lantern Rite will start in a few hours, so you should do your best to enjoy it.”

“Are you not going to go to see the giant lantern?” Paimon asked. “The really big one... The really big special lantern... The ping-cao lantern...” She furrowed her tiny eyebrows at Lumine.

“Mingxiao,” Lumine prompted, trying not to laugh.

“Mingxiao!” Paimon brightened up. “Aren’t you going to go and see the mingxiao lantern?”

Xiao pressed his lips together. Demons on the outskirts of the city, karma pulling at his every nerve, humans all around him while celebrating something they could not fully understand, and more exposure to Lumine? Even the thought of this sent him stomach into his throat, heart threatening his ribcage. The noisy loop of the past few days surged in his thoughts, *absolutely not, absolutely not, absolutely not*. Even if he wanted to, the iron fist closed around his windpipe would not have allowed it. “I can’t do crowds.”

“You don’t have to go into the city!” Paimon chirped. “You can see it from outside the city. The lantern is of Skybracer. Wasn’t he an adeptus? Did you know him?”

Skybracer. Xiao kind of recognized the name. Skybracer had been a very nice stag adeptus. He’d never been bad to Xiao, and he’d sacrificed his life for Liyue during the Archon War, but in the end the lantern was just a stag-shaped lantern, not worth risking everything that would come with

being in the city. “I did, but I just don’t have enough interest to warrant going into the city.”

Sorry, he almost said.

“Okay. That’s okay.” Lumine reached up for Paimon’s hand and pulled her gently towards the stairs. “We’ll be right back.”

Oh. Okay.

Xiao closed his eyes and told himself he would be fine if they never returned. He would be fine.

Chapter End Notes

I'm too tired to link but if you wanna read more about the Lantern Rite, Google
"Genshin Currents Deep Beneath the Lanterns"

NEXT CHAPTER TO COME NEXT WEEK BECAUSE I'M SICK OF WAITING
AND SO ARE ALL OF YOU

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I'll Be Here

Chapter Summary

“Come to the Lantern Rite with me.”

“Please don’t make me say it again.”

“You don’t have to come to the city,” Lumine said quickly. “I brought the festival to you!”

His head lurched forward on his neck. “What?”

“C’mon,” she said invitingly. “We brought out some food that you like and some xiao lanterns below the hotel, where there will be absolutely no humans walking by, especially today, when everyone is in the city. There’s almond tofu, grilled tiger fish, and probably eight different kinds of tea.” She held out her hand. “Come down and see it, at least?”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Not even an hour later, Lumine was standing behind him with her hands on her hips, waiting expectantly for him to acknowledge her first. He hadn’t even had a moment to really breathe.

He wasn’t sure if he was pleasantly surprised or just surprised. “What is it?”

She planted her feet firmly on the ground. “Come to the Lantern Rite with me.”

This again. Irritation, and an underlying aching sadness, pricked at the nerves under Xiao’s eyes. It took most of his energy not to sigh aloud. “Please don’t make me say it again.”

“You don’t have to come to the city,” Lumine said quickly before Xiao could say *I can’t do crowds* again. “I brought the festival to you!”

His head lurched forward on his neck. “What?”

“C’mon,” she said invitingly. “We brought out some food that you like and some xiao lanterns below the hotel, where there will be absolutely no humans walking by, especially today, when everyone is in the city. There’s almond tofu, grilled tiger fish, and probably eight different kinds of tea.” She held out her hand. “Come down and see it, at least?”

He didn’t take her hand, but for whatever reason — maybe he just wasn’t thinking straight as a clashing combination of *too close*, *absolutely not* and *I don’t want to be alone anymore* crowded endlessly in his brain — he strode ahead of her and down the stairs. Lumine, grinning from ear to ear, rushed to lead him all the way down to the docks of the inn.

And he stopped short.

Paimon was floating next to a table covered in all kinds of Liyuen cuisine, including a large dish of

almond tofu and a bubbling pot of Adeptus' Temptation stew. Behind her was a cart of merchant's wares, covered in lucky charms and floating xiao lanterns. Other decorative items were strewn about in the small area, with lights strung up similar to the cultural decorations in the city. "Surprise!" Paimon cheered. "Look, Xiao, Lumine made this for you! Huai'an and Verr Goldet and I helped!"

It was simple without being too much, and yet it was still entirely too much.

She made this for me.

"What do you think?" Lumine asked, tilting her head to look at Xiao carefully. He could sense a twinge of nerves in the question, like what he said really mattered. Like she cared about what he thought.

I avoided you for days, and you do all this for me.

"I see what you mean by bringing the festival to me. Is there a reason for all of this?" He asked, avoiding the growing feeling of choking guilt in his face.

She shrugged, smiling sideways. "The Lantern Rite includes everyone. Even you. *Especially* you."

But *why*? He shook his head. "Human motives defy my attempts to understand them."

"Weeeeeell," Lumine quipped, that endearingly infernal smile spreading. "Not human, remember?"

"Yes, but not *inhuman* either," Xiao shot back without thinking, and Lumine giggled.

"*Hey!*" Paimon pointed aggressively at the table. "Less thinking and talking! More eating! Come on, sit down!"

It was hard to argue with that. Xiao and Lumine sat at the small bamboo table, and Paimon immediately got to work dismantling a whole chicken with her teeth.

"Sorry about her," Lumine said quietly to him as she loaded her plate with some stir-fried mushroom and lotus. "She really likes Mondstadtian food, since that's mostly just giant pieces of meat. It keeps her quiet and content, though." She leaned over to pour tea into Paimon's cup, which the latter did not notice for a moment.

Xiao half-smiled and dipped a spoon into the dish of almond tofu, silky, sweet, refreshing, and welcome reprieve from the nervous angst from the last few days. He hadn't realized how badly he'd wanted a dream until now, but his nerves felt soothed, even over the confusing *no too close* and *yes I'm not alone! No! Yes! No! Yes!*

"Thank you for doing this," he said softly. "You didn't have to."

"I wanted to!" Lumine filled his teacup with jasmine tea, and he tapped his fingers on the table in thanks. "The Lantern Rite is supposed to be for the adepti. I'm surprised it turned into what it is now." She poked at a mushroom with her chopsticks. "Ganyu told me that Mountain Shaper and Moon Carver might not even be in Liyue for the Lantern Rite. It makes me feel bad."

He frowned. "Don't feel bad. I'm sure they are exactly where they want to be. It isn't as though this is the first year that the Lantern Rite has been like this."

"That's almost even sadder." She shook her head, like she was clearing her mind of the thought.

“So... How was your day, Xiao?”

I thought about my family and how dumb I am for most of the morning to afternoon.

Why did you call my name? Why haven't you been sleeping? Are you upset that I haven't been around?

How do I know that you'll stay?

Will you stay? Am I capable of believing you?

“Eventful,” he said honestly. “I don't know what I'm doing most of the time.”

“Ha!” Lumine burst out laughing. “That's relatable. This morning I thought I was hunting down an arsonist, and then by the end of the case I didn't know if I wanted to laugh or cry from how stupid people are. I'm learning that I can't have expectations for my days.”

“Mm. You do important work.”

“Thank you!” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and glanced at him quickly before looking away, busying herself with ladling out a bowl of Adeptus' Temptation soup.

He nodded. He didn't know what else to say. He wished he talked more. Or that he knew what else to say.

The rest of the meal passed in relative, kind of cheerfully awkward silence punctuated by chopsticks clicking and spoons clinking against china, and Paimon gnawing blissfully on chicken drumsticks while making fun comments about the Adeptus' Temptation. “Are you tempted by it?” She asked with a sneaky grin, waving a spoonful around in the air. “Does it temptate the adeptus?”

He half smiled and shook his head, though he privately admitted it didn't smell bad and didn't churn his stomach like most food did.

“Boo,” Paimon pouted before returning to her spoon.

Lumine eyed Paimon, but she didn't say anything else, keeping her eyes on her food, even though she was mostly pushing around the plate with her chopsticks at this point and kind of smiling.

Xiao finished his almond tofu, licked the remaining sugar from his lips, and laced his fingers in his lap. This had been nice, getting to experience the Lantern Rite on his own terms, with two people whose presence he could at least tolerate and food that he liked.

He looked around at the xiao lanterns hanging about, a glowing flame with small bits of plaustrite surrounded by beautifully crafted, hand-painted paper, flickering with buttery candlelight. He had never had the time or taken the time to look closely at the lanterns, which were usually distant yellow dots in the sky by the time he had even a moment during the night.

He had a ghost of a memory of Indarias and Pervases telling him about the Lantern Rite, and Guizhong telling him to look up at the lanterns one year. He had never expected the lights to look so exquisite, or so carefully, *lovingly* created.

Hm. He stared at the lantern, which turned slowly in the slight breeze. Had he really let the last thousand or so years pass without even once looking up at the lanterns?

Maybe there will be no demons this year. Maybe I could have a chance this year.

Verr Goldet walked up to the table, one hand up in a half-wave. “Traveler, I hope I’m not interrupting, but if you want to be in Liyue Harbor in time for the mingxiao lantern’s release, you should probably go now.”

“Oh!” Lumine folded her napkin and stood, pushing her plate in. “Thank you, Verr Goldet!” She reached over to nudge Paimon, who had actually started to nod off into her bowl. “C’mon, Paimon.” She looked quickly at Xiao again before focusing her attention back on the table. “Xiao...”

He shook his head. “Are you really going to ask me again?”

Lumine smiled, and he could practically see her mischief growing. “I mean. *Ahem.*” She cleared her throat. “O Vigilant Yaksha, please escort us at least halfway safely to the city, oh no!” She clasped her hand dramatically to her forehead, and Paimon laughed. “I’m just a poor hooman, I can’t do anything for myself! The road is full of dangers and I am but a defenseless, allegedly mortal girl—”

“Aiya,” Xiao sighed. “Okay, I’ll walk halfway with you.”

He didn’t miss Verr Goldet in the corner of his eye, giving Lumine a wink before excusing herself. He also didn’t miss the fact that Lumine could just teleport into the city.

She’s still here.

A few minutes later, after Lumine lost a very vigorous disagreement with Verr Goldet about paying for the meal, the three of them were walking and floating down the path towards the city. Paimon buzzed, high on good food and singing a little nonsense song along the lines of “Lantern Rite, Lantern Rite, food for Paimon alllllll night.”

Xiao suppressed a smile. Paimon wasn’t growing on him. She was not.

She buzzed alongside Xiao. “You’re one of the heroes that this festival is all about, right?” she asked. “Why don’t you wanna get involved?”

“*Gosh*, Paimon.” Lumine kept pace right beside Xiao, matching him step for step. She poked Paimon’s cheek. “What is it like to be you, and just say whatever you’re thinking immediately without thought for the consequences?”

“Wha?” The fairy pushed Lumine’s hand from her face.

Touch was so casual between them.

“I don’t really like being around people,” Xiao answered. “They don’t have to worry about anything. They have this peace and joy that I don’t fit into. Crossing paths with all those joyful people will just make me...”

He stopped short.

He didn’t want to be alone, but that didn’t mean he could immediately handle being in the middle of the city, paranoid to every person passing by, sensitive to every look and emotion, accompanying *Lumine*, who was probably at this point had one of the most recognizable faces in most of Liyue, and countless friends.

What am I saying?

Why did I agree to this walk, again?

I can't handle the city.

Not now. Not tonight. Not while his entire brain was upside down and clearly shrinking in his unthinking skull. Not before he went into battle without even knowing really what he was up against.

“Nothing,” he said to Paimon’s questioning face. “That’s all I have to say.”

Liyue Harbor came into view as they walked, and he stopped abruptly. The sound of the city was already carrying all the way over to where they stood practically in the mountains, and he grimaced from the mental strain even from this distance.

“This is as far as I’ll go.” He folded his arms across his chest and blinked hard. *Focus*. “Enjoy the festival. And thank you again.”

Paimon opened her mouth and closed it again, looking not unlike a fish. Lumine smiled. She hadn’t been this quiet in all the time that he’d known her.

He tried not to think too deeply about that.

“You’re welcome,” she said finally. “You’ll have a good view of the lanterns from here, so please watch, okay?”

You could stay with me, he almost said.

“Okay,” he said instead.

“Bye,” Lumine said quietly, waving at him one last time before turning around, and Xiao watched with his lip between his teeth as they walked down to the city.

◇ ◇ ◇

He kind of stared blankly at the city after that.

This whole day had made absolutely no sense. It had lasted all of eternity, and the sun was only just now setting.

What had actually happened? What had he accomplished today? Anything? Nothing? It was all very confusing. It seemed to him like he had just made dumb decision after dumb decision, and nothing he’d actually done had made sense with anything else that he’d done. Avoiding Lumine hadn’t worked, though to be fair he had never made it clear that that was exactly what he’d been doing. He’d never been so completely shit at basic communication before, ghosting a supposed friend for days before fighting alongside her and accepting her invitation for a Lantern Rite dinner.

Why, exactly? Why did it have to be so roundabout and complicated?

Xiao sighed. He’d received an indirect blessing from Pervases, encouragement from Ganyu, and both permission and resounding, almost suggestive exhortation from Zhongli to just join Lumine and try to find happiness. What else did he need to finally give his own mind the ability to just *move forward*?

Maybe it’s because she still doesn’t know enough about me. He clenched his jaw so tightly that his ears rang. Maybe she knew what he’d told her, which was definitely the most impactful of it, but

there was still so much she didn't know and hadn't seen — mostly all the ways he went about handling or repressing the impact. In any case, even if he wanted or decided to tell her about it, it would never be the same as her *experiencing* it. Maybe once she saw what he did, that he still longed for dreams and still had to cut or scratch or otherwise hurt himself, that on some days the karmic pain was so bad that he'd spend hours curled up trying to ignore it; *that* would be the kicker for her to go away.

His legs were starting to go numb from standing for too long, and he still smelled like rain from earlier, and he hadn't even noticed that his fingernails had been pressing into his palms again. *Fuck*. He scowled and pulled his stiff fingers from his hands.

The sky darkened over Xiao's head, deep blue clouds against a starless night, a persistent reminder of the battle ahead for which he was *not ready*, all because he'd *wasted the entire day doing nothing, going in circles, falling back on his own word, confusing himself and everyone else about what he wanted*—

And then he saw it.

Xiao's gold eyes widened, his lips parted, and the smallest sound escaped him. "Oh..."

A streak of clear, bright blue light flowed gracefully through the darkness, headed by the paper form of a blue and gold stag and casting a brilliant sea of lights across the city in its wake.

Thousands of lanterns floated up into the sky, illuminating the shapes of the clouds with glittering gold in every direction that Xiao could see or sense, uniting the people of Liyue in the simple act of releasing a xiao lantern and making a wish. The humans had created their own galaxy, a bright infinity of their wishes, fears, and hopes lighting up the visible world with their own constellations.

Xiao's numb legs buckled, and he sank down slowly to sit on the grass, eyes still fixed on the sparkling sky as the blue stag-shaped lantern ascended even higher, dispersing clouds to reveal the full silver moon. The stag reared up in a glorious expression of victory before exploding in a series of fireworks, aqua and scarlet and violet and gold, reminiscent of the sky during the Archon War — too loud, so loud that Xiao winced and shook his head — but beautiful above the still-rising lanterns. And it wasn't all bad; the firecracking sound would help to deter demons for at least a little longer.

So I can stay here a little longer.

I want to stay here a little longer.

A smile played at the corner of Xiao's mouth, and he couldn't find a reason to fight it. Some xiao lanterns floated lazily past him, and he reached out his senses to hear the prayers of their makers.

"I wish for health for my daughter."

"I wish for happiness, good grades, and a boyfriend in school this year."

"I wish for Kazuha to stay and voyage with us forever!"

"I wish for a pet rabbit."

"I wish to find a way to make cooked slime delicious!"

"Xiao, you're still here! Did you get to see the mingxiao lantern?"

“Hah?!” Xiao just about jumped a foot in the air and cursed his own carelessness for letting Lumine surprise him. “Yes! Yes. I did.” He cleared his throat awkwardly, relieved he hadn’t immediately summoned his spear and killed her. *What is she doing back here?* “What are you doing back here?”

Lumine grinned, dropping down to sit beside him. “Looking for you. I hoped you’d still be here.” She opened her hand, revealing a xiao lantern that she quickly pulled open and lit with a match. “Do you want to send off a lantern with me? Or is that something too frivolous for an adeptus?”

“Why do you always look for me?” He shook his head, trying to shake out the invasive thoughts of *too close, too close, too close*. “It’s your lantern, and I don’t want to impose—”

“*Xiao*,” Lumine interrupted, sighing. “I have about a hundred of these. Make a dang wish.” She held out the paper lantern to him. “Let’s make one together, okay?”

Xiao glanced at her warily, but he reached one hand out gingerly to hold up one side of the delicate lantern. It was lighter in his fingers than he thought it would be, but the painting and paper was just as quality as the ones he’d seen at dinner earlier. He couldn’t help asking. “You made this?”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah,” Lumine shrugged. “Close your eyes and make a wish, but don’t tell me what it is, okay?” She shut her eyes tightly, like she was really concentrating hard on what she wanted to wish for. “Let go whenever you’re ready.”

The only archon Xiao had ever prayed to intentionally, or would even consider making a wish to, was currently working for a funeral parlor in the city. Making a wish served no purpose, and either way, he couldn’t think of anything to wish for.

I just want to make the right decisions.

The lantern tugged gently at his fingers, wanting to rise upwards, and he let it go.

Lumine felt the shift in the lantern’s weight and let go as well, opening her eyes and watching the lantern ascend, smiling with satisfaction when it joined the sea of lights. “I’ve done that fifty times today, and I’m still not sick of it.”

The lanterns reflected in her yellow eyes, fireflies at dawn.

Xiao looked away. He pulled one knee closer to his chest, resisting the urge to curl up entirely into a ball. “You made a wish every time?”

“Yup. There are just so many things to wish for.” Lumine leaned forward, trying to catch Xiao’s eye. “Hey,” she said softly, like a nudge. “Will you please talk to me freely now that Paimon’s not here?”

A torrent of guilt rushed and crashed through Xiao’s ribcage. “Sorry,” he whispered.

“For what?” She exclaimed, but her face softened, and she stopped trying to catch Xiao’s eye. “What happened, Xiao? I know that you probably needed some space after the last time we talked, but I didn’t think you’d disappear entirely, or that we’d be so…” she waved her hands helplessly, trying to come up with the right word. “I don’t know. Awkward?”

Xiao gave in to the need to curl up and pulled his leg all the way toward his chest, resting his chin on his knee. The grass was damp, and his skin felt cold. “I don’t really know what happened,” he answered. “Today was all over the place. Too many things happened and also nothing at all.”

“I get that.” Lumine absentmindedly picked at the soggy grass. “What did you do, other than saving me from treasure hoarders and having a very small Lantern Rite at Wangshu Inn?”

He’d just about forgotten that all of that had happened on this same day. “I visited my old home, where my family used to live before.” Their lantern floated further out over the city, and he lost track of it among all the others.

“Is that something you do often?”

He shook his head. His hair fell in front of his face, shielding his eyes from Lumine entirely. “Not at all.”

A small line of concern formed between Lumine’s eyebrows. “Why did you go?”

Xiao’s face twitched. There was a decision to be made here, and he didn’t know if he was ready to make it.

Luckily or unluckily for him, he didn’t have to make that decision. “You’re avoiding me,” Lumine stated, voice almost too casual.

He didn’t answer, but his heart pounded a guilty rhythm in his chest.

“I’m sorry if I overstepped the other day,” she said, still forcing casualty, but Xiao could sense a slight wobble of hurt in her voice. “I probably could have waited a little longer to invite you to adventure with me, or maybe asked someone else more about if you were ready or not, or... I don’t know.” She shook her head and chuckled without any humor. “I’m sorry. I hope I didn’t mess things up permanently...”

Xiao’s head snapped up. “Please don’t apologize! It’s not because of you!” He shook his head wildly enough that his hair whipped across his face. “It’s not because of you,” he said again, more insistently.

Lumine pursed her lips, but her hand stilled at her side. “You can tell me anything, if you’re willing to say it,” she said softly. “What happened?”

“I don’t...” Xiao’s throat tightened, but words and breath fought their way out in the open. “I guess I couldn’t handle myself after telling you everything,” he finally wrangled out. “Telling you things felt more like bleeding than talking, like I couldn’t stop the story from coming out even as much as I didn’t want to say it. Not because you pressured me,” he said quickly before she could assume, “but just because. I guess it’s all been buried for too long.”

He coughed, and it was more like a wheeze. His throat felt raw and dry.

“Oh, here.” Lumine, always a good friend before she was anything else, immediately reached into her bag and started pulling out a comical amount of bottles and covered cups. She dumped them unceremoniously on the damp grass, and Xiao just stared. “I have, um, an Athenaeum, but that’s three shots of espresso so you probably don’t want that... Dustproof potion, but that tastes like magnets... Apple cider? Or a bottle of allegedly holy water from some quack in Springvale?” She waved a bottle of what was definitely just spring water at him.

Xiao coughed again to hide his smile. “It’s okay,” he said, but that didn’t stop her from clinking the glass bottles around.

“No, wait, I have tea!” She pushed down to the deepest part of the bag and withdrew a bowl, an actual wide blue-and-white china bowl, filled with gold tea and dark leaves. “It’s from Qingce

Village, so you know it's good." She uncovered the bowl and held it out to Xiao.

The cooling tea smelled like any average lapsang black tea, but Xiao took a sip anyway. This, at least, was something familiar; a conversation over tea. "Thank you."

She smiled, with a little less enthusiasm and sunshine than she usually did, but she smiled. "Of course."

"Anyway..." He fought the urge to bite his lip and took another sip instead. "It was all buried too long," he murmured into the bowl.

The atmosphere had returned to somberness, but Lumine immediately broke the quiet by clinking all of the unused bottles back into her bag, humming thoughtfully. "I'm thankful you felt comfortable enough to tell me about it."

He nodded, looking back at her. "And then you made your very kind offer, and *it isn't that I don't want to go with you*, I'm just..." Wow. He'd never said anything like that out loud.

Before he even looked at her, he could feel that Lumine was smiling.

"You don't understand how stupid and lonely I feel," he said lamely. "Because I didn't spend the day with you, because I didn't help with a possible threat of actual arson from the treasure hoarders, and because I *like* fighting with you, but I just feel like I can't. My family all died, and you don't even know about all of that. I feel like if I leave then I'll be abandoning what they all fought and died to build."

Say it again.

"I want to be with you. I *want* to be with you. But I don't know *how* to be with you. I just..." He took a deep breath, not realizing how long he'd been speaking without pause. "I just figuratively bled all over you and then didn't know how to patch myself up, and this whole day has just consisted of me jumping aimlessly around. That's the answer to your question. That's what happened."

Archons. He'd been talking for a long time. He took another swig of tea, hoping that his mouth would stop moving if he gave it something else to do, and placed the bowl on the grass beside him, away from Lumine.

"Hm." She left him no silence to be anxious about. He sneaked a look at her from the corner of his eye, through his hair. Her hands were folded in front of her lips, but he could see that they curved up in a smile.

Why was she smiling?

"You shouldn't have to patch yourself up," Lumine said pointedly, dropping her grass-stained fingers from her face. "I knew you needed space. I didn't think you needed space because you wanted to bleed out alone."

Xiao shook his head. "This metaphor has stopped working."

"Well, if I speak plainly, you're going to be all, 'do not disrespect the ways of the adepti.'"

"I do not sound like that."

"You so do. I can say it in Liyuen, and it'll sound more like you."

“You don’t even know how to say that in Liyuen.”

“Bu jing adepti!”

“Ha!” Xiao couldn’t help it — after this impossibly long day in his impossibly long life, Lumine’s faux-low voice and horrible pronunciation was just too much, and he laughed. “Lumine, has no one taught you the term for *adepti*?”

“Hey, it doesn’t come up in normal conversation!” Lumine grumbled. “What is it?”

Xiao put his fingers to the muscles of his jaw and pressed. He hadn’t actually laughed out loud in a long, long time. “*Xingren*,” he said, slowly regaining his composure.

“Bu jin xingren,” she repeated in her own voice. “Good?”

“Good.” He cleared his throat, turning just slightly to look at her. “What was the point you were going to make?”

“I forgot.” She answered promptly.

Xiao smiled again, lifting his wrist to hide his face.

“No, wait! I remember!” Lumine leaned forward, bringing herself up to face him in a kneeling position, and her voice dropped into a more serious tone. “I hope I don’t offend you or your family when I say this, but... If I may, I believe that they would not have worked so hard or fought to death only so that you could carry this alone. I doubt that they cared so little for you that they would do everything to prolong your life like this only for you to have to patch yourself up.” She spread her hands out, like an offering. “I want to believe they wanted you to experience life beautifully. Don’t you?”

Xiao lifted the bowl of tea off the grass beside him. If he tilted the bowl, he could see the reflection of the lanterns on the surface of the tea. He pulled his lower lip in between his teeth. “Yes.”

He tilted the bowl again, and he could see Lumine’s reflection in the tea. She was smiling meekly. “You said you don’t want to leave behind what they fought and died to build. Please correct me if I’m wrong, but if they fought and died to build you a better world to live in, do you feel like you can join that world?”

Xiao frowned slightly. It all made sense. Everything she was saying made sense, but logic had never really had any effect on the way he felt. “I feel like the world is too good for me,” he said softly. “It’s not right for me to be enjoying it. I feel like I shouldn’t be allowed to experience the good when I’m so bad.”

The honesty burned his throat. He took the last sip of tea, getting a small mouthful of leaves as well, but he drank it down anyway, disappearing the bowl with a wave of his awkward hand.

“Is that how life works?” Lumine asked as though she was just wondering aloud, but he could tell she wanted an answer.

He shrugged and shifted slightly. His mask dragged harshly along its chain at his side. “Isn’t it? Aren’t human criminals separated from human children, since the bad should be separated from the good?”

Lumine looked at him, face completely stoic. “When I was four, I smacked my twin brother Aether

as hard as I could in the back of the head with a wiffle ball bat.”

Xiao blinked.

She blinked back.

“Out of the absolute minimum that you remember from your life before Teyvat, you remember *that*?” Xiao sighed. “Why did you do it?”

“I dunno.” Her mouth worked like she was trying not to laugh. “Because I could?”

“Okay...” He shook his head, sending his hair flying out from his face. He’d forgotten his point. “Sure, but *you* being evil as a child does not disqualify the symbolic purity and innocence of the average human child.”

Lumine blew out the ghost of the laugh she’d been holding back, fluffing up her bangs. “It still doesn’t mean that humans aren’t bad, or that you can’t have anything good.”

“It’s how I *feel*, though.” Xiao wrapped his arms around his knees again. The lanterns of the festival had stopped coming from the city, and those that had ascended were only getting further away into the sky. “It’s how I feel. And you haven’t even seen beyond the surface of how I feel. The more time you insist on spending with me, the more you’re going to see it.”

She was quiet for a moment.

Xiao closed his eyes. *Please don’t go away.*

“Are you trying to scare me off?” She asked, half-heartedly joking.

He swallowed the lump forming in his throat. “Not at all,” he answered honestly, “but you should know if you’re going to make yourself a part of my life like this. Especially on the nights of the Lantern Rite.” He lifted his head and gestured at all the lanterns glinting away above them. “All these lanterns, all lit by people? I’ve killed enough to have one voice on my soul for every lantern that you see. I can always hear them. Screaming, crying, demanding more death... It’s all my burden to carry.” He let his arm drop and turned to face Lumine without looking at her, still sitting on the grass with his knees tucked up to him. “It should have nothing to do with you. It shouldn’t have to be your problem.”

“Maybe I *want* you to be my problem,” she said, cheerful, casual. “I don’t see hell when I look at you. I don’t see someone that needs my protection. You’re a problem, for sure, but not because of your trauma.” She grinned when Xiao blinked like he was offended. “You’re a problem because everything that I do, I want to be doing it with you.”

“Hm,” he huffed softly. “Everything?”

“Everything,” she repeated, a little louder, a little more serious.

“Well.” *Where is this going? What am I doing?* “If you ever find yourself in trouble, you can call my name, like you did today.”

She leaned back. “You could make it to me fast enough for a rescue?” she asked, half teasing.

He tilted his head up towards the sky, relaxing his shoulders and releasing his legs forward.

“Whether yours or Liyue’s, I hear all cries for help, all prayers for peace, and all the wishes carried by the lanterns, even above the noise of karma in my soul.”

"Geez," Lumine blanched. "That sounds overwhelming as hell."

"It definitely is," he agreed, "but I can handle it." *For you.*

"Mm." She looked up as well, following his line of sight. "Does that mean you won't come with me to Inazuma?"

A little twinge of guilt pricked at Xiao's heart. "I think I need more time," he whispered.

"Okay," she said.

He bit his lip. "I'm sorry..."

"Okay, listen." She scooted closer, taking all of his attention without even making a hair of physical contact, and he blinked in surprise. "Xiao," she said, absolutely sincere. "Take your time, okay? I'm not here to make you do anything that you don't want to do or don't feel ready to do. Please, just trust that I will hear you and I will always try to understand you. *I know* there's so much more to know about you, but I'm here for all of it. I will take care of myself, and I will call you if I need you, but *I'm not going anywhere that I can be separated from you, okay?* I've seen your scars. I've seen your pain. I've seen some things about you that I have never brought up and will never bring up until you are ready to talk about it, and then even if you never are, I'm here for all of it. I'd rather survive the loss of you than live without your presence, and no matter how long you decide to stay, it will be worth it."

Xiao inhaled sharply.

"You know what?" Lumine continued like she hadn't noticed. "I was in the city when they released the mingxiao lantern, the big blue one shaped like Skybracer. Paimon was right next to me, all of my other friends were around me, the city was gorgeously decorated, my stomach was full of all my favorite foods, and the lanterns were lighting up the sky. It was amazing. It was a scene right out of a fairytale..." Her eyes flashed as she looked at him. "And I hated it, I hated all of it, because it was beautiful and you weren't there to see it with me."

Ah.

She bit her lip and released it, and when she spoke she sounded like she was on the verge of tears. "You say I can call for you when I need you, but the truth is, I want you all of the time. You don't have to be afraid of me leaving when the pain of fighting ghosts and voices in your head gets to be too much, because I'll be here. The running and surviving and forgetting and all that you're so afraid of are over, because I'll be here! I'll be here as long as you need me to be, Xiao. I'll be here."

There they were, the words that Xiao had needed to hear his entire life, said by someone who he knew for certain was telling the whole truth. No technicalities, no ambiguity, no smoke screens, no lies. *I'll be here.*

Lumine was glowing, slightly flushed from the effort that had gone into every word she'd said, still kneeling with her hands on her thighs, face just centimeters from Xiao's, and he froze.

Lumine, Lumine, Lumine,

Honey-yellow eyes, soft blonde bangs, white feathers, white flowers, sweet scent, glowing cheekbones, long eyelashes, bright face like sunshine, beautiful,

Lumine, Lumine, Lumine.

He'd never seen her from this close up. He couldn't bring himself to blink or pull away. The thought didn't even occur to him. The world all fell away, and the golden aura of the girl in front of him filled his entire line of vision.

She will never be too far from me. She will always be within reach. She wants me to stay with her.

I believe her.

Unidentifiable emotions flooded through Xiao's entire body. He couldn't tell if he wanted to laugh, or cry, or slap himself awake, or... *Or...*

Lumine stared at him, steady and strong. He used to hate being stared at, being watched like he was some piece of meat or a beautiful body or a weapon to be feared — but with Lumine's sparkling eyes on him, he felt seen. He felt real.

She smiled, gentle, easy, no pressure at all. "Xiao," she whispered. "If there's anything you want from me, you should take it."

He always had been one to follow his instincts. Every rational thought swirled away, and Xiao pressed forward.

His lips fell softly on hers, and she let out a small sigh of contentment that Xiao breathed in like a dream. His hand seemed to move with a mind of its own, reaching up to cup Lumine's cheek, drawing her closer to him as he deepened the kiss, gently encouraging her lips apart with his own. He could feel her fingers drawing across the back of his neck without any pressure, surrendering and giving him complete control.

It should have felt weird and awkward. He should have felt more insecure about it. Maybe this was bad timing, and he didn't know what he was doing. But this was as easy as a spiral, but instead of tearing him down, the kiss lifted him up.

Her lips were soft. She tasted like sunsettia.

Xiao pulled away first, inhaling deeply like he'd never tasted air before, looking down at Lumine's peaceful face. He pressed his forehead against hers.

She smiled audibly, and her cheek lifted under his hand. "Thank you," she whispered.

He smiled back. His eyes softened, and he brushed his fingers across her cheek, pushing her bangs back behind her ear. "Will you come with me to defend Liyue tonight?" he asked quietly.

She laughed. "Is that your way of saying *thank you, I love you?*"

"Hm." He shrugged. "I've never asked anyone for help like that. I'm taking baby steps."

"Of course I will," Lumine answered. Her eyes crinkled at the corners. "I like fighting with you." She stopped. "I mean, *alongside* you."

"Ha." Xiao stood. His spirit felt fuller than it ever had, like he was complete for the first time in centuries.

Lumine followed suit, taking the time to stretch one arm up over her head but also casting a sneaky side glance at Xiao. "Was that your first kiss?"

"Yes," he answered simply.

“Dang. I would have brushed my teeth or something.” She not-so-subtly checked her breath.

He huffed. “It’s not as though you can take it back now, even if you wanted to. It’s too late.”

“Hehe.” Lumine winked at him. “I have no regrets.”

Xiao cringed from the attention, rubbing the back of his neck where she had touched him. “Is this what it means for me now to always have you here next to me?”

“Yup.” She smiled, more sincerely than jokingly. “So that would mean you have the prayers of the humans, the horrendous voices of karma, and also my lovely voice right next to you. Luckily for you, like I said, I’m not going anywhere.”

“Hmf.” He chuckled softly. It felt right. “My fight goes on, I guess.” He felt brave. He felt emboldened. He reached out his hand to her. She laced her fingers with his, and he gently squeezed her palm. “But I would like to know more about you.”

“Lucky for you, I have a lot to say.”

Lumine started on a story, mixing names and places and terms from nations unseen to Xiao in his ears. As he listened, a new loop started in his mind — and for the first time ever, not at all in a bad way.

I’m not alone anymore.

The two of them headed off away from the city, still glowing under the light of a million stars, thousands of lanterns, and a beautiful melody from millennia and lifetimes past:

“I will be right here.”

Chapter End Notes

Finally, amirite?

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What It Looks Like

Chapter Summary

“I was planning to take a trip to Mondstadt and spend a couple of weeks there. I guess we’ll see what this next holiday is all about.”

Xiao bit down on his lower lip. *Be supportive.* “When is it?”

“Sometime next week.”

Be supportive. “When do you plan to leave?”

“Within the next couple of days, probably.”

Be supportive. Sand and cement combined into concrete in the cavity of his chest.
“Okay.”

Lumine abruptly released his arm and swung around to stand right in front of him, and Xiao almost squeaked in surprise. She smiled brightly, and their noses nearly brushed.
“Please come with me?”

Chapter Notes

Happy Lantern Rite~ <3

Chinese translations in the end notes

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“This might have been the most fun I’ve ever had just fighting mobs.” Lumine straightened up from where she’d just stabbed the last or so whopperflower into the grass. The sun was just starting to send pale streaks across the dawn sky, a beautifully clear morning to follow the first night of the Lantern Rite.

Xiao smiled faintly. His mask brushed against his fingertips at his side; he hadn’t worn it once the entire night. “This might sound horrible, but it’s probably the same for me.”

Lumine rolled her sword hand, dismissing it with a flick. “Are there usually a lot more than that?”

“Since before Osial? Yes.”

“Oh. I hope I was still helpful.”

“Hmm.” Xiao tilted his head. “You are very helpful.”

“Thank you!” Lumine beamed, planting her fists on her hips and turning her face up to the lightening sky. “Alright, so where even are we?”

He looked around. “Lisha, close to Qingxu Pool. The Chasm is beyond Qingxu, and Liyue Harbor is that way.” He pointed east. “Have you been around here?”

“Oh.” Lumine thought for a second. “I’ve been to this part of Lisha. I’ve never been to the Chasm, though. I haven’t had any reason to, at least not yet. Am I missing out?”

Xiao made a face. “Endless caverns, spores of horror, and little to no jade left to mine... No. You are not missing out.”

“Mmm... Okay.” Lumine yawned then, putting both arms behind her back and stretching. She rubbed her eyes for a moment before stepping closer to Xiao and tucking her hand into the crook of his elbow.

His arm tingled from the contact. “Are you tired?” He asked quickly, looking closely at her face. The skin under her eyes looked a little dark and drawn, and he frowned.

“A little. I can sleep anywhere now. When I first got to Teyvat, it was hard to fall asleep at all, and now I’m just like... whoooooop,” Lumine quipped, making a spiral motion with her free hand.

She must have caught the concern in his eyes, because she quickly backpedaled. “Don’t worry, I don’t mean that I sleep just *anywhere*. I’m always safe. I mean there could be a lot of noise, or I could be on a chair instead of a bed, but if I’m determined enough, I can just sleep there.”

Xiao nodded slowly. “But do you need sleep to live?”

A look of understanding crossed her face, and she half-smiled. “You mean, like a human? Nah, I don’t need sleep to live.” She moved closer, sliding her hand down Xiao’s arm to lace her fingers with his, and hid her face in his sleeve. “But I *like* sleeping. I kind of enjoy it. It’s like a little break from the mostly horrible and unbelievably long experience that is life.”

He squeezed her fingers gently in response, but a worried line appeared between his eyebrows. “Don’t you dream?”

He could feel her smile against his arm. “I want to make a joke, but I won’t.”

“Lumine, I’m serious.” He squeezed her hand again, more firmly this time. “Do you dream?”

She sighed and lifted her face up to look at him. “Sometimes I have nightmares, and they’re pretty bad, and I may or may not wake up crying sometimes, but most of the time it’s just subconscious colors and faces. I’m okay. I only sleep because I enjoy the escape, not because I’ll die like a human without it.”

“Of course not. There’s nothing weak about you.” Xiao peered into her eyes. They seemed bright and clear, but when was the last time he’d seen someone who actually needed sleep? “Do you need to take a nap or something?”

“Huh?” Lumine’s eyebrows furrowed. “You’re offering? Isn’t that...”

Xiao shook his head, clearing the intrusive thoughts before they could manifest. “It would be different if you were alone, but I’m here. I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Her eyes softened. “Thank you for going out of your comfort zone for me. I think I’m okay right now, but I adore you for offering.”

Oh.

Xiao cleared his throat and looked away, resisting the urge to cover his face with his free hand. *I don't know what I'm doing.* “So... Are you going to go back to the city, then?”

Lumine grinned. “I’m not going to leave you unless you tell me to, Xiao.”

“That’s not at all what I’m trying to say,” Xiao sighed. “I meant to ask, are there things that you need to complete today?”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know. Adventuring things?”

Lumine shrugged, absentmindedly flexing and relaxing her fingers against his. “Right now, I still have to wait on a couple of things. I don’t think I’m ready to just barge into Inazuma illegally.”

The thought of Lumine traveling to Inazuma illegally, alone except for Paimon, did not sit right with Xiao at all. He clenched his free hand into a fist, fighting the stress leaching the warmth from his limbs. “What do you usually do when you’re not adventuring or preparing for further adventuring?”

She blinked. “Uh, hang out with you? Gather things? Talk to Paimon, do commissions and bounties, get more familiar with Liyue as a whole, cook, read, nap...” She tilted her head. “I was planning to take a trip to Mondstadt and spend a couple of weeks there.”

“Oh.” Xiao frowned; disappointment weighed down on his heart all at once, quicksand and cement filling his chest. What had he expected from this? It wasn’t like he’d thought she’d just never leave Liyue again, even if for just a little while. He knew she’d go somewhere at some point, just *not this soon*. “That’s nice.”

“Mhm,” she mused. “I was going to ask around about Dainsleif and my brother, and there’s some festival or holiday coming up that I was invited to.”

Her fingers were still laced with his, but she felt very far away, her eyes unfocused in the direction of the horizon. Xiao squeezed her hand. “What festival?” He forced the words out.

Be supportive.

“I don’t know, but if it’s Mondstadt, it’s probably got all kinds of alcohol involved,” Lumine answered with a wink and a smile.

A quiet breath of a laugh escaped Xiao’s nose. “That’s generalizing.”

“You’re right, but so far, I’ve attended the *Weinlesefest*, which is literally the wine harvesting festival. And from what I’ve read, *Ludi Harpastum* is all about history with songs, games, and a lot of wine. We’re two for two on wine-themed holidays in Mondstadt.” She sighed, loud and dramatic. “And in the meantime, no one believes that I’m old enough to drink, and I don’t have proper Teyvat identification.”

Xiao smiled uneasily. “You didn’t strike me as a wine enthusiast.”

“Oh, I don’t drink anyway. It’s okay.” She waved her hand dismissively. “I guess we’ll see what this next holiday is all about.”

Xiao bit down on his lower lip. *Be supportive.* “When is it?”

“Sometime next week.”

Be supportive. “When do you plan to leave?”

“Within the next couple of days, probably.”

Be supportive. Sand and cement combined into concrete in the cavity of his chest. “Okay.”

Lumine abruptly released his arm and swung around to stand right in front of him, and Xiao almost squeaked in surprise. She smiled brightly, and their noses nearly brushed. “Please come with me?”

Xiao gaped like a fish.

It was not his proudest moment.

A million thoughts crashed into each other and crossed his mind all at once.

Mondstadt was not far at all, it shared a border with Liyue, people walked between there and here almost daily, it’s safe, it’s not far, it’s somewhere Lumine is familiar with, *she has handled every threat that is there on her own and then went on to do the same for Liyue*, it was just for a festival and nothing bad would happen, it’s not far, *I have to ask Zhongli.*

The biggest surprise was that Xiao’s immediate reaction had been to rationalize why he *should* go instead of trying to guilt himself into *not* going.

When did that happen?

“I have to ask Zhongli,” he managed to say after an embarrassingly long pause.

Lumine bumped her nose gently against his. “Do you really think he’s going to say no?”

She was just a little bit too close, and Xiao turned his head to the side to breathe in. “I’ve never asked for anything like this, but I’m not about to just leave Liyue without his permission or knowledge.”

She pulled away, and Xiao exhaled. “That’s fair. Sorry,” she said softly, putting her hands behind her back.

“It’s okay.” He truthfully hadn’t hated the contact. “What do you need to do to prepare for Mondstadt?”

Lumine tilted her head, thinking. “Could we just take a waypoint? Can you teleport there?”

Xiao’s eyes widened. “I’ve never been outside Liyue before. I don’t know about teleporting outside of Liyue to somewhere I don’t know. I don’t even know what it looks like.”

She definitely heard the slightly panicked waver in each *I don’t know*. “That’s okay,” she said. “It would probably be best for you to transition out of Liyue anyway. I wouldn’t want to cause you extra stress from the sudden change and potential culture shock. Or definite culture shock.”

He closed his eyes and folded his arms, grounding himself. “I’m happy to walk there with you. It’s probably only about as far as Wangshu Inn is from Liyue Harbor. And if you promise that all I have to do is attend a festival and not meet new people, I think I could handle it.”

“Yes, definitely.” Lumine smiled audibly. “Wow, I feel all this pressure all of a sudden to make your first trip out of Liyue worth it! I have to plan out all the things I want to do and see with you

now.”

Xiao slid one eyelid slightly open to look at her bouncing gently on the tips of her toes, palms touching thoughtfully in front of her face. The mental list she was creating was almost visibly scrolling behind her eyes. Her hair captured the sunlight.

He smiled a little; it was nice to see her like this, comfortably in her element and doing something she clearly cared very much about. *I would like to know more about you*, he’d said to her the night before, but in his heart of hearts he knew that wasn’t entirely true. *I would like to know everything there is to possibly know about you* would have been more accurate.

Navigating touch, and whatever it was that their relationship had escalated to, was going to be a whole ordeal unto itself, but he didn’t have to think about that now. He’d agreed to *leave Liyue*. The implication of that was enough to make him sit and wonder, probably forever.

What wouldn’t I do for you?

“Is Baizhu able to make the medicine that Zhongli makes for you?” Lumine asked.

“He could try, but he probably shouldn’t,” Xiao answered, sounding more calm than his thoughts would have suggested. “There’s cinnabar in it, and I vaguely remember that being toxic for humans.”

“Aw,” she pouted slightly. “Should I just ask Zhongli directly? Would anything else Baizhu made help you?”

Xiao snorted. “Human medicine? Probably not.”

Lumine made a faux-disappointed face. “So what does help you besides that when you get panicky? Or when you have karmic pain?”

“... Hm.” When was the last time he had felt karmic pain? Not for the past couple days. Had he been too distracted to feel it? Was it because he was killing less? That couldn’t be right.

“I’ll just pack extra tea,” Lumine murmured, making an invisible tick on her mental list. “Tea is good. Everyone likes tea. We could all have some tea once in a while. Tea cures everything.” Her voice dropped. “At least, according to Zhongli it does.”

Xiao laughed out loud, startling Lumine, and he smiled at her. “You do.”

“What?”

“You help the karmic pain and panic.”

“Oh.” She glowed. “Really?”

“I mean...” Xiao shrugged slightly “I think that the pain hasn’t been as bad. It’s at least less distracting than it usually is, and... I don’t know. It’s easier to take when I’m with you.”

Lumine pressed her hands to her cheeks, hiding a blush behind an almost-dorky smile. “That’s the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me,” she mumbled almost unintelligibly. If Xiao had been even an inch further away, he might not have made it out at all.

He reached out and patted her back reassuringly. “I’m doing my best,” he whispered.

“I acknowledge that,” she whispered back. “I still want to remind you that if you change your mind

about going to Mondstadt, or about... anything else, I'll respect that."

Archons. He appreciated her so much.

His palm was suddenly very warm against the bare skin of Lumine's back, very aware of the curve of her shoulder blade against him. He quickly dropped his hand and cleared his throat. "Do you want to go to Liyue Harbor now? You can prepare whatever you need to prepare, and I can go find Zhongli."

"Okay. I don't know how long I'll take, so I guess I'll call you when I'm ready?" She reached out hesitantly to take his hand, stopping just before making contact.

"Or if you need anything." He clasped her hand in his, squeezing lightly.

"Or if I need anything," she echoed in agreement, drawing closer to Xiao's side. "Ready to teleport?"

"Wait a second."

I'm doing my best.

Xiao gently tilted Lumine's face towards his own, and he pressed his lips to her cheekbone. "Thank you," he said softly in her ear.

He memorized the afterimage of her smile as they whirled away.

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Xiao had never actually been to the Wangsheng Funeral Home before. In his defense, he'd never had a reason to until now.

It was a good-sized building towards the south side of Liyue Harbor, but the door was all the way to the side off of the main street. Xiao definitely wouldn't have been able to find it on his own if it wasn't for Hu Tao's Board of Announcements just outside the building, upon which she had hung wooden coupons that said "buy one, get one free!"

Buy one funeral, get one free.

Xiao drily scoffed the ghost of a chuckle before pushing open the doors of the building.

A tall, thin woman in a dark brown dress stood motionlessly behind the front desk in the lobby. She didn't look up at him.

"Hello," Xiao said slowly, as to not startle the woman, who still didn't move. "Can you point me in the direction of Mr. Zhongli's office?"

Nothing.

He could hear her normal heartbeat and blood pressure if he extended his senses out, so she must have just been hyper focused on something he couldn't see, even though she wasn't thinking or praying.

"Alright... I'll figure it out, thank you," he said to her before continuing down the halls.

The halls smelled like death and formaldehyde poorly disguised by too many flowers and heavy perfumes. The air was permeated with all kinds of emotions, ranging from sad and mourning to

relieved and hopeful; not that far off from what Xiao generally felt on a daily basis. The walls of the hallway were dark-stained walnut wood, lending an even more depressing feeling to the already depressing building.

Just being in the city alone would have horrified Xiao maybe a year ago, and being in this dark hallway even more so — but now he felt like he had a purpose. It was weird how much easier it was to go about his usual fears when he knew exactly *why* he was doing it, or for whom he was doing it.

In any case, somewhere in all this darkness was Zhongli.

He finally found the door that said “CONSULTANT” in large gold letters and knocked.

“Come in.” The deep, calm timbre of Zhongli’s voice blessedly rang out from within the office, and Xiao opened the door.

The office was bright and warm, air sweet with incense, osmanthus, and silver needle tea. Zhongli sat behind a desk covered in papers that he seemed to be ignoring in favor of a book in his hand. Gold half-rimmed reading glasses sat on his nose.

“I thought I sensed you, Xiao,” Zhongli said, pleasantly surprised as he looked up at his guest. “I almost didn’t believe it.”

Xiao lifted one shoulder awkwardly. He didn’t know how to move in this space. “Here I am.”

“Do you want to sit? Is everything alright?” The god of Contracts casually pushed the papers on his desk aside and gestured to the armchair across the desk.

“Everything is alright.” Xiao maneuvered himself into the lump of a chair, which was more comfortable than it looked. “You have a nice office.”

Zhongli smiled, sliding a bookmark into his novel and placing it on the desk. “Thank you. It’s good to see you in a good mood.” He leaned forward, all his attention directly on the adeptus before him. “Not that I mind your presence at all, but what brings you here?”

Oh. “Um.” He had not thought about what he was going to say.

Usually in these moments, Xiao’s mind went a mile a minute, but now it was more like both his mental process and tongue had glued themselves to the roof of his mouth.

Zhongli waited patiently.

“Um,” Xiao tried again, eloquent as ever. *Stupid.*

“Do you want a drink?” Zhongli asked at the same time that Xiao said, “I kissed Lumine and she invited me to go to Mondstadt for a week or so, can I go?”

The Omnipotent Archon of Liyue, Contracts, and Geo froze entirely.

Xiao would have sworn the air cooled a few degrees. A clock on the wall ticked loudly. He couldn’t breathe out. *Maybe I should have practiced that.*

Without a blink, Zhongli took off his glasses, reached into a drawer in his desk, withdrew a silk cloth, polished the lenses, put the glasses back on, and took them off again before folding the arms delicately and placing them on the desktop.

Say something. "... Do those lenses actually have a correction?"

"Not at all," Zhongli answered without missing a beat.

"*Hah-hem.*" Xiao quickly turned his chortle into a faux-cough.

Zhongli pressed his lips together like he was trying not to laugh, and the warmth returned to the room. "So... Xiao, do *you* feel like you'll be alright if you go to Mondstadt?"

"If you tell me that I can go, I will be okay to go," Xiao answered, holding back a smile of his own.

"Do you know that you don't need my permission to do anything?"

"Yes, but it would make me feel better to have it."

A slow grin appeared on Zhongli's face, and he gave Xiao a knowing look. "Yes. Of course you may go to Mondstadt with Lumine."

Xiao nodded, and he couldn't stop the corners of his eyes from betraying the laugh he was fighting. "Thank you, my Lord."

They managed to hold their serious tones for another few seconds before collapsing into smiles and quiet chuckles for fear of being heard by anyone outside the office, finally acknowledging the genuinely surreal experience that was Adeptus Xiao sitting in the human office of the human Funeral Consultant Zhongli.

"Are the glasses just for making you look more like a human?" Xiao asked, massaging his cheek with his knuckles.

"Exactly." Zhongli nudged the frames aside. "They're just like the Vision and the outfit, although I don't believe that glasses distract the average merchant from realizing that I still don't know how to navigate with Mora."

Xiao grinned and shook his head. "I wonder what they actually think of you, or if anyone suspects who you really are."

"Pft. If the old Liyuen ladies suspected who I really was, they would stop telling me I'm such an eligible bachelor and trying to introduce me to their granddaughters."

Xiao raised one eyebrow. "I remember you and Guizhong really being over the moon about trying to find *me* someone."

"Well, now you've found someone, and I *am* over the moon." Zhongli smiled ardently at Xiao.

"*And*, if I may, it seems like you are, too. When did this happen?" He laced his fingers together and leaned forward.

"Yesterday," Xiao answered quickly. "It doesn't have to be a whole big thing, I just wanted you to know—"

"I know it doesn't have to be a whole big thing, but I have waited a very, very long time to see the spark in your eyes come back, and it is no small thing for me to see it again." Zhongli's jaw worked to suppress an uncontrollable grin, relief and something like glee softening the angles of his face. "Are you?"

"Am I what?"

“Over the moon.”

Xiao’s spine shivered with warmth, sending pleasantly fuzzy tingles on his palms and his neck. The space between his ribs was doing little flips. He could still taste sunsettia on the tip of his tongue...

He immediately looked down and started polishing his Vision with his thumb, curtaining his face with his hair. “Yes,” he said, just above his breath. “I like talking to her. I like fighting alongside her. She makes me feel... more whole? I don’t know if those are the right words.”

“Those are the right words.” Zhongli nodded slowly, turning the ring on his left hand. “I understand.”

Xiao shivered again, shaking his head to settle the sensation. “I never thought that something like this could happen to me,” he murmured, more to himself than to his oldest friend. “I didn’t think anything could overcome the physical pain of karma. I thought feeling this way was out of my reach. I always thought the world would change, and I would stay the same.”

Zhongli tilted his head from side to side. “As if you don’t know who you are outside of what you’ve experienced?”

“Mmhm.” Xiao flexed his fingers. “Who even is ‘Xiao’ if not a ‘very traumatized adeptus?’” He asked, dry and sarcastic. “Was it naive of me to think that? Or to limit my identity to that, and think I could never change?”

“Oh, my child,” Zhongli exhaled softly. “Is it naive to acknowledge that pain is pain and death is death? As if loss and grief are local or static? As though the absence of a person or the presence of fear doesn’t cover every thought and action?” He tapped his fingers on the desk. “No, it’s not naive. It’s logical. It’s how we protect ourselves. But clearly...” he gestured at the glasses in front of him. “We find ways to rise above our backgrounds. We make our circumstances our own. We move forward. You are moving forward.”

Xiao smiled. “Is this what moving forward looks like?”

“I mean...” Zhongli gestured at the office surroundings, drab compared to the majesty of the mountains and trees outside. “This is what it looks like for *me*. I think you’ve already seen a taste of what it looks like for you, and you’ll continue to figure it out.”

The unspoken words between god and yaksha hung in the air between them, clear enough that Xiao could almost hear them aloud anyway.

This is good. We are getting better. I am happy for you. I am happy for me.

“We move forward,” Xiao echoed.

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The evening sky was golden orange with sunset and speckled with lanterns from Liyuens who were a little early in their celebrations, but Xiao genuinely could not sense any demonic presences in a wide radius outside the cities and villages. There were some mobs, but nothing that the adventurers, Millelith, or other adepts couldn’t handle.

Xiao drew in a quiet breath. The air was so still that the lanterns overhead were floating straight up.

So far, this was what moving forward looked like: coexisting with Pyro-using strangers, not chasing after mobs on the second night of the Lantern Rite, walking into buildings in the city, and kissing Outlanders. A year ago, Xiao wouldn't have been able to do any of that, or believed he eventually would.

Insane.

He exhaled a soft cloud into the cold air. Tomorrow he'd be going to Mondstadt, further away from Zhongli than he'd been since they'd met, in a foreign country with a foreign language and a foreign culture. And he felt fine. He felt *excited*.

What else would moving forward look like?

The corners of his eyes crinkled.

“XIAO.”

His head snapped up as Lumine's prayer drowned out all his thoughts, instinct pushing a curl of anxiety into his stomach — but the call was unhurried and gentle. She wasn't in trouble or panicked.

But she'd called his name. She must need something. In the city. During the Lantern Rite.

Crack.

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When Xiao opened his eyes, he was directly outside of what looked and smelled like an open bar-style restaurant that was packed full of allogenies talking, laughing, occasionally shrieking, and eating. Humans were bustling with festivity in the street behind him, but their presence and thoughts and wishes were all overwhelmed by the sheer amount of elemental power crammed in the restaurant in front of him. He recognized a few faces, but mostly he was lost in a sea of humans he'd never seen before. He could smell the tiger fish and “mora meat” pastry they were eating, and he took a shaky breath in through his mouth to avoid inhaling too much of the oily scent.

“Did you know that if the soup cools to room temperature, it'll condense into jelly?” The bright voice of a slightly frazzled-looking Pyro user called out over all the hubbub.

A Hydro user sitting at the bar crossed his legs delicately. “I have a poem for this!” He yelled, disproportionately brash for such a delicate-looking young man. ““Cut the rain and leave the rainbow, and carry the soup to freeze!””

“*Aiya*,” the same Pyro user snapped. “Xingqiu, quiet down! You're embarrassing me!”

“Great poem, great poem.” From deep inside the restaurant, out of Xiao's line of sight, Lumine's flat and sarcastic voice rang out. “I'm sure Ganyu will appreciate it.”

Xiao shook his head bemusedly, half-smiling, taking another slow breath through his mouth. He moved to stand in the dark alley at the side of the restaurant, hoping that none of the allogenies would approach him and that Lumine would seek him out once she got the chance.

Of course, that was too much to hope for in such a densely packed area.

“Conqueror of Demons?” A tall, broad pirate woman with a patch over her left eye addressed him boldly.

Xiao almost jumped. He hadn’t expected to be recognized. He folded his arms, on guard for whatever might come next. “Yes.”

The pirate woman grinned. There was an Electro Vision hanging on the left side of her ribcage, and her arms rippled with well-trained muscles, but she made no movement towards him and her tone was respectful. “I’m Beidou. Don’t feel obligated to remember the name. Are you looking for the Traveler? Do you want me to go in and tell her you’re waiting for her?”

Beidou. Xiao actually recognized this name. She was the captain of the unofficial Liyuen navy fleet. According to Zhongli, a few years ago she had earned her Vision by taking down a hydra sea monster before it could reach the mainland.

Well.

That was very kind and unexpected of her.

“Yes, please. Thank you, Captain Beidou,” Xiao said, relaxing his shoulders.

Beidou’s cheeky grin transformed into a genuine smile, showing how pleased she was at being recognized. She turned and walked into the restaurant, and Xiao mentally added *interacting with the Liyuen Pirate Queen* to the list of what moving forward looked like. What a life.

“Xiao, you’re here!” Lumine skipped out of the restaurant and slid to an excited stop in front of Xiao, flushed and radiating kitcheny stove-top warmth. She had a big red apron over her white dress, and she’d removed her bracers to roll her sleeves up to her elbows.

He resisted the urge to touch her. *There’s too many people around.* “You called. Of course I’m here.”

“Thank you,” she said sweetly. “Sorry about the crowd. Xiangling, the cook over there, started making this Adeptus’ Temptation soup with me last week and it’s finally done, so she threw this little get together. She *says* it’s to celebrate the Lantern Rite, but it’s also a little sendoff for us. I told her we’re only going for a few days, but I’m not about to turn down an Adeptus’ Temptation party, especially after all the *work* we put into it.” She scowled a little at the end.

Xiao raised his eyebrows. “You cooked it? How did you know how to make such a complicated dish?”

“Oh, we had a lot of research help from Zhongli and all of the funding from Ningguang. A lot of people pitched in, but I did most of the actual cooking today. So much of making good soup is waiting for things to soak.” Lumine waved her hand around, even as she looked him dead in the eye. “Would you like to take a sip?”

He hesitated. Maybe the goal was to *move forward*, but reacting badly to food, especially a delicacy as exquisite as Adeptus’ Temptation, in front of *all of Lumine’s allogene friends*, seemed like an extremely high risk. He tilted his head forward, and his hair shielded his peripherals.

“You can come into the restaurant and sit in the back, if you would like to,” Lumine offered. “No one is back there except me and Zhongli, and you’re less likely to be approached by someone else, or someone off the street. But only if you’d like to. I already appreciate you being here at all.”

Wonderful, thoughtful Lumine. “I would like that,” he said softly, and she smiled.

The interior of the restaurant was dark but warm. Lumine had put a screen up to the open stove to dampen the aggressive light of the fire. The air smelled like sweet and mild seafood broth from a giant bubbling pot on the stovetop, better than what Xiao had smelled yesterday at Wangshu Inn. Best of all, Zhongli sat beside the stove, a bowl of Adeptus' Temptation in hand.

He looked wildly out of place, rich brown and gold and amber sitting royally on a plain wooden stool in this small restaurant, but he also looked as content as ever. "Good evening," he said to Xiao. "Fancy seeing you again so soon."

"Good evening, my Lord. Did you know about this?" Xiao couldn't help asking.

"I knew they were making the soup, and I knew Xiangling was likely to have a get-together. It's not in my nature to try and surprise you, Xiao." Zhongli took an innocent sip from his bowl.

Lumine ladled some of the soup into a smaller bowl and handed it to Xiao. "Inviting you was my idea," she said to him as he accepted it. "I knew you wouldn't want to be here, so I waited until now to call you, when people were more likely to leave and less likely to try to socialize with you."

Zhongli lifted his eyebrows at Xiao, as if to say, *look how well she knows you*.

"Thank you," Xiao responded, and he wasn't just talking about the soup. He pointedly avoided Zhongli's eyes as he spooned up some of the Adeptus' Temptation.

Bits of meat and fish shimmered in the liquid, but they didn't smell overwhelming or nauseating. It was fascinating how something that looked so complicated could be so simple, the best version of itself, but it was still food and it was still something that Lumine made and he wanted her to think that he was able to handle things like this—

Stop thinking. Just try it.

The soup was in his mouth before he could think any more about it. It was rich and mild at the same time, the taste reminiscent of an easier time, as if the scents of his childhood had been condensed into a bowl of shining broth. The meat melted on his tongue, dissolving into the soup and disappearing.

Soft and simple and mellow, like the sound of a Dihua flute.

Soft and supple, like sitting alone in Lingju Pass.

Soft and golden, like the crystal amber of Mount Hulao.

Lumine rubbed her hands together expectantly. "What do you think?"

"It's good," he answered truthfully, placing the bowl down on a nearby table. "The fact that I can eat it and like it is good. Thank you for sharing it with me."

"Thanks for trying it." Lumine smiled. "You can stay if you want to, but I'll be okay if you decide to go home, too. Tomorrow's a long day of walking." She reached out and tapped the back of Xiao's hand.

Xiao cast his eyes to Zhongli to get his archon's opinion, but Zhongli was suddenly very interested in the contents of his own bowl.

"Maybe I'll sit for a little bit," Xiao said, moving to sit on the floor at Zhongli's feet, his back against the wall. "You can go socialize. I'll be okay."

"Okay." Lumine turned off the heat on the still-bubbling soup before going back outside.

Xiao watched as she went, smiling slightly as the frazzled Pyro user — Xiangling — pointed to Lumine's apron, resulting in Lumine tearing it off and throwing it aside. He really did appreciate that Lumine took his word for it when he said he'd be okay, unlike the average people in his life who would repeatedly ask if he was sure.

Zhongli was watching him with a mixed expression. "I've never seen you look so... Not uncomfortable with this many humans around," he said. "It's nice."

"Well," Xiao shrugged one shoulder. "They're not drunk, they're not trying to worship me for a favor, and they care about Lumine. That's tolerable."

"Mm," Zhongli murmured into another spoonful of his soup. "One of those things is not like the others."

Xiao looked through his hair at the scene outside the restaurant. Lumine, social butterfly, flitted from friend to friend: jabbering away with Keqing, picking at miscellaneous snacks with Xiangling, poking fun at The Loud Poet Xingqiu, and ultimately encouraging an ardent Pyro user to start playing a drum she had randomly had on her back. Definitely not Xiao's kind of place, but it was nice to see Lumine so happy.

"Oh, that was Qiqi." Zhongli leaned forward, projecting his voice out the door. "Happy Lantern Rite, Qiqi!"

The small zombie had just about walked past the restaurant, but now she took two steps backwards and peeked into the restaurant. Xiao raised his hand in a wave, and she cocked her head to the side. "Did someone... Say my name?"

"Yes, I did," Zhongli said patiently. "Happy Lantern Rite."

"Happy Lantern Rite." Qiqi walked deeper into the restaurant, a little closer to Xiao. She was holding tightly onto a glass jug that was too big for her to wrap her small hands around it. She had stuck a structured curling straw into the top of the jug and now took a long sip, staring at him with large pink eyes all the while.

"Hi, Qiqi." Xiao smiled at her. "Does my hair look like a finch?"

She pulled off of the straw. "Yeah. I like it. I like finches... And coconut milk."

"Is that what you're drinking?" He nodded at the jug.

"Yeah!" She took another sip. "Qiqi thinks it's delicious. I can't taste it. But it's delicious."

Xiao coughed to hide a laugh, and Zhongli nudged him with the tip of his boot. "How is your Lantern Rite experience so far, Qiqi?" Zhongli asked.

She squinted her eyes in concentration. "My day was fine, I think. It's warm in here, though. I don't like it when it's too hot. Feels rotten. Close to death." She glared at the screened-off flames in the stove. "Hu Tao."

Xiao immediately covered his face with his hand, and Zhongli chuckled to the side. "That's good to hear," Xiao managed.

Qiqi sucked on her straw some more, turning to look out of the restaurant and away from the flames. "Someone is staring at you," she commented nonchalantly.

“Who?” Xiao abruptly swung his head around. Enemies? Mobs? No, he would have sensed something like that.

“Bear.” She not-so-politely pointed at a small but chubby orange panda bouncing happily on the seat between Lumine and Xiangling at the bar.

Xiao squinted; it was hard to tell exactly where the panda was looking, but it did seem to be very focused on Xiao and Zhongli. Why was there a panda at the restaurant? More importantly, *why was it staring?*

Zhongli smiled at the confusion on Xiao’s face. “Do you recognize him?”

“Should I?” Xiao blinked.

“Marchosius, the Stove God.” Zhongli waved at the bear, who wobbled with joy.

“I thought he gave up his power and memory to heal the land a few centuries back?” Xiao waved awkwardly. The bear waved back.

“Yes, he did. He didn’t die, though, and he gave Madame Ping and myself all his recipes before falling asleep for all this time. He found Xiangling when he woke up.” Zhongli gave his head a bewildered shake. “She named him Guoba, like the snack. They’re best friends now, and he accompanies her while adventuring, or if she needs a cooking fire... Or chili peppers.”

“Hm.” The bear just looked so small and cheerful, not at all giving off the impression of a mighty god of flames that had fought in the Archon War. “Do you think he’s truly happy, after going from the Stove God to the best friend and chili farm of a mortal girl?”

Zhongli didn’t answer.

Xiao tore his eyes away from Guoba to peer up at his friend.

“Do you think I am truly happy, after going from the Archon of Contracts, Lord of Geo, Prime of the Adepti, and the God of Contracts, History, and Wealth to a funeral parlor consultant working under a mortal?” Zhongli leaned forward, a patient smile on his face.

Oh. *Shit.*

“I’m sorry, my Lord.” Xiao bit his lip. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“We make our circumstances our own,” Zhongli said, waving his hand in a way that Xiao knew he wasn’t offended. “Moving forward for Marchosius looks like fighting alongside his best friend, cooking with her, and eating all the delicious snacks that she makes. For him, that’s a great life. Moving forward for me looks like living among the people I’ve fought my whole life for, making new connections, and learning how to work instead of fight and rest instead of govern. To me, this is a great life.” He stacked his now-empty bowl with Xiao’s, pushing them away from the edge of the table.

Xiao nodded. “I understand.”

“I know I said so this morning, but you’ll definitely be continuing to figure out what it looks like for you.” Zhongli shrugged and looked pointedly at Lumine, who was outside saying good night to her departing friends.

“Ha.” Xiao smiled. “I am. I will.”

Qiqi slurped hard on the last of her coconut milk, pulling loud bubbly sips through the crazy straw. “Sorry, what’s going on? What are we talking about?”

Zhongli laughed. “We’re talking about how being alive is a journey and a gift.”

“Life,” Qiqi said into her straw, pink eyes shining. “Gift. Yes.”

“Awww, Qiqi!” Lumine skipped into the restaurant and swept Qiqi up into her arms. “You’re so cute!”

Qiqi’s eyebrows furrowed sharply. “Lu... Traveler. Lu...”

Lumine shook her head as Xiao opened his mouth. “Don’t help her,” she hissed at him. “She’ll get it.”

He obediently closed his mouth. *Qiqi remembers her. Qiqi remembers Lumine’s face.*

Qiqi is also moving forward.

“Is the party over?” Zhongli asked. “It seems like most of your friends are splitting off.”

“Just about.” Lumine looked over her shoulder, which was difficult with a zombie in her arms. “I’ll probably help Xiangling clean up this place, and then I’ll probably go and rest for the remainder of the night.” She glanced at Xiao. “Is that okay with you?”

Xiao nodded. “Of course. Tomorrow is going to be a lot of walking, so it’s best that you rest anyway.”

She squinted at him. “You should rest, too.”

“If there’s no mobs.”

“There won’t be any mobs that specifically require the Conqueror of Demons to handle them.”

“You don’t know that.”

“Alright, well, given the track record of the past couple days of the Lantern Rite festivities, *there won’t be any mobs that specifically require the Conqueror of Demons to handle them.*”

“I know the track record. I’ll look around a little bit and then rest.”

“你知道我是对的。”

Xiao huffed softly. “Sure.”

“Lumine,” Qiqi said with a slow grin. “Your name is Lumine.”

“Yup, that’s me!” Lumine laughed, patting the zombie on the head. “I’m going to let you go now, Qiqi, it’s getting late. Do you know where you’re heading?”

Qiqi nodded. “Bubu Pharmacy. Stretching time. Good night.” She patted Lumine’s head back before squirming to be put down. “Good night, finch and big finch,” she waved, and Xiao waved back.

“Good night, Qiqi.” Zhongli reached for the stacked dishes. “Traveler, would you like help cleaning up?”

The God of Liyue, doing dishes instead of vanishing them and conjuring new ones. Moving forward. *Of course.* Xiao shifted in his spot on the floor.

“No, we’ll be okay. I appreciate the offer, though.” Lumine took the bowls from Zhongli and placed them in a bus tub. “Happy Lantern Rite, Zhongli. Thanks for helping with the Adeptus’ Temptation, and also for coming here tonight.”

“It’s my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me.” Zhongli put his hands together. “When you go to Mondstadt, please greet Venti on my behalf. Oh, and bring back some dandelion wine. And also some dandelion seeds, so that I can try on my own to replicate the dandelion wine. And maybe also some fresh wolfhook; I haven’t had good wolfhook juice in centuries. But pick it on the last day before you come back, so it’ll be as fresh as possible.”

“Aiya.” Xiao pinched the bridge of his nose, *bu hao yisi* trickling down the back of his neck.

Lumine smirked. “Sure thing. I’ll invoice you for the cost of the wine so Diluc the Mondstadt Wine Tycoon doesn’t think I’m a freeloader.” She placed a lid on the pot of remaining Adeptus’ Temptation, moving it aside to a shelf for storing away. “Anything else for our dear and precious Lord and Savior Rex Lapis?”

He hummed thoughtfully. “One more thing.”

Archons. Xiao elbowed his god in the shin to no effect.

“Hehe. I guess I asked.” Lumine finally stopped darting around the kitchen and came to a standstill in front of Xiao. “What can I do for you?”

“Take care of my son,” Zhongli said softly. “He’s my glory and joy.”

Oh.

Oh.

Lumine smiled all the way up to her eyes. “I will.”

Xiao pulled his knees up to his chest, curling in on himself and resting his head on his arms. His face felt hot, and the space behind his eyes felt like it was melting. *I can take care of myself*, his gut reaction urged him to say, but he bit the words back down.

They care about me.

“It’s only a couple of days, I know, but be watchful of each other. Xiao is a good fighter, but he’s as dense as Tianshu Meat, so don’t let him say anything rude to anyone important.”

“Oh, don’t worry, I know. Hehe.”

Xiao’s head snapped up, golden eyes wide. “Hah?!”

Lumine grinned. “It’s okay, Xiao, if you need to say anything rude, we can speak in Liyuen.”

Zhongli raised one eyebrow. “You’ve learned how to say rude things in Liyuen?”

“No,” Lumine answered quickly. She snagged a dish towel from the shelf and headed out the door. “Going to clean the counter now, Happy Lantern Rite, thanks for everything!”

Xiao threw his hands up. “I didn’t teach them to her.”

“I didn’t think you did.” Zhongli laughed and shook his head, even as he emanated waves of fondness. “Happy Lantern Rite, Xiao.”

He smiled back. “Happy Lantern Rite, Zhongli.”

Xiao could see a glimpse of the sky through the curtains above the door to the restaurant. Stars and xiao lanterns dotted the dark blue strip. He could see Lumine through the bar window, chatting with Xiangling and cleaning the booth where all her other friends had sat. The air still smelled like Adeptus’ Temptation and that dream-scented perfume that Lumine used. It was the Lantern Rite, and instead of seizing with karmic pain in the mountains somewhere fighting both literal and spiritual demons, Xiao was in this restaurant in the city, feeling the warmth of Zhongli’s shin against his shoulder and not flinching away from it.

He felt content. He felt loved.

It was such a weird and foreign and impossible feeling that nauseating dissociation pulled on his vision, but he swallowed it down. He was with Zhongli and Lumine, the two people in the world he trusted the most at this moment.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

No biting. No cutting. Just... this.

This is what moving forward looks like.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Chinese New Year!!!

Translation: "You know I'm right."

[Lantern Rite Party Setting, Poetry, and Soup With Way Too Many Freaking Ingredients](#)

[Marchosius/Guoba](#)

[Zhongli in Glasses](#)

[The Lady at the Funeral Parlor](#)

I don't know when I can update again :) Muscling forward!

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